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SMOKE OF THE .45



"Wal, you'd better untie Gallup. He don't look happy."

SMOKE OF THE .45

BY
HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

AUTHOR OF "OUT OF THE SILENT NORTH"

FRONTISPIECE BY
FRANK TENNEY JOHNSON

NEW YORK
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TO
THOMAS A. BRANDON
—COMPANION OF MANY TRAILS—
THROUGH WHOSE EYES
I LEARNED TO LOVE
THE DESERT.

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CHAPTER I.

OUT OF THE PAST.

SEPTEMBER had come and gone, leaving the desert brown and somber against the graying sage. The first of the cold rains had fallen. Round-up time was past. The cattle left in the hills were moving down to lower pastures. Unerringly they sensed the brief Indian summer yet to come, which would turn the grasses green for a few brief days before the cold, snow-bringing winds of late October were upon them.

There was that in the air on the range which said the year's work was over. . . . The world was waiting. But in the little towns plumped down beside the shining rails of the Espee and the Western Pacific, all was activity and bustle.

The steer shipping was on and the held-over wool clip was going aboard the cars. It was the harvest time of the mountain desert—the pay day of the range.

Pockets were well lined. There had been famine—days on end of hard work, of no spending. Now was the time of plenty, of satisfied appetites. Winnemucca, Golconda, Elko, Halleck, Standing Rock, in the heart of Ruby Valley—they were all alike—boisterous, turbulent, prosperous; save that Standing Rock, newer than its sister towns, was more boisterous, more continuously turbulent, and less concerned with its future prosperity.

And yet there was one who entered its hospitable gates this late afternoon who seemed untouched by its gayety. His eyes, screwed into the perpetual squint of the true desert breed, viewed Standing Rock's activities with apparent unconcern. It was an old story to him. He knew the desert's little ways!

His coming caused no comment. And this, despite the fact that his clothes were of an almost forgotten cut, popular in the days when Dodge

City reaped its harvest from the great northward trek of the longhorns.

The Big Trek is a thing of the past; the trail itself lost, forgotten. Dodge City has long since settled down to most proper respectability. And those hard-fisted, quick-shooting men who squandered their wealth and lives, there, along the way from Santa Fe, have departed to that limbo from which none return.

But a practiced eye would have said that the man who rode into Standing Rock this day was of that crew. His face was a fighting face, withal he was on in years, gray hair closely snugged to his head. In other days he had been a rugged man; but there was a sadness upon him now, a wistfulness in the eyes, that softened his boldly chiseled features.

That he moved unnoticed is proof again that our one cosmopolitan zone has ever been the great West. Spurs, bridle, saddlebags, reata, even the big, high-stepping stallion which he rode were foreign to northern Nevada. That they were Spanish or Mexican—the difference is slight in the West—no one cared a hoot. The desert is wide.

Men have a habit of coming long distances, and from strange places. And best—far best of all—a man's business was his own business!

The two trunk lines paralleled each other in passing through the town. In the short half mile between them, Standing Rock took form; half finished, half painted—a one-street town of one story buildings making a brave show with their Cripple Creek fronts.

Hard by the Espee tracks this monotonously regular sky line was broken. For there, wonder of wonders, stood a two-story brick structure—a hotel!—the pride of Ruby Valley; the Marble Palace; J. Scanlon and V. Escondido, proprietors.

Steer and wool money had financed it, hence Vincenzo. He was a petulant Basque, and although in the storied past he and his people had sprung from stock as Celtic as his partner's, he—Vincenzo—was in a fair way of being erased by the versatile Scanlon. In quite the same fashion their institution had lost its chilling and undeserved title—unless the marble-topped bar were justification—and was called, in easy familiarity, the Palace.

The profits of this establishment were restricted solely to the first floor, for, save at times like this, or when some unfortunate commercial traveler missed No. 19 going west, no one ever thought of staying there the night. But, oh, the profits of that lower floor!—bar and keno, roulette and poker of a flexibility well calculated to satisfy the whim of the most jaded customer.

Having stabled his horse and placed his saddle, saddlebags and bed roll on a convenient peg, the stranger made for the door of this hostelry. It was a few minutes after five. The Diamond-Bar waddies were having their turn at the shipping pens. An hour later they would be making merry. Now, though, the street was deserted. The wool platform was directly in back of the hotel. The spur of track leading to it managed to squeeze past the hotel by the narrowest of margins.

Four loaded cars stood on the siding. By six o'clock another would be filled. A freight engine would shunt them upon the main line that evening, and start them on their long ride to Boston.

For another week this would go on. At least twenty heavy freighters, piled high with baled

wool still reeking of the creosote dip, stood in the space about the platform waiting to be unloaded. More would come. Twenty-mule teams dragging three, and even four, wagons chained together would snake in the smelling fleece.

Standing Rock should have been a place of ample elbow room, but here, in man's peculiar way, was its greatest activity jammed in a space so crowded that the stranger stopped to watch the Basque boys as they fought the big bales with their long, steel wool hooks.

His interest in the work on the platform caught the attention of a man who sat in the Palace bar, feet on the window sill, chair tilted back in comfort. This man had been sitting there some time, busy with strings of figures on the pages of a small leather-covered memorandum book. This occupation had absorbed his entire attention for many minutes; but as he stared at the stranger standing beside the track the little book fell from his fingers. Almost with one motion his feet came down from the sill and the chair to its four legs. His face was white when he straightened from snatching for the little book.

He darted another glance at the stranger, as if doubting his senses. He had made no mistake! His hand trembled as he pushed the chair out of his path.

"It's him," he muttered. "Traynor!"

A belated sense of caution caused him to sweep the room with his eyes to see if any one had observed his ill-concealed alarm. A sigh of relief forced itself to his lips as he saw that Escondido, the Basque proprietor, was his only companion. Vin was hunched over the bar, his head resting in his arms, sound asleep.

A rear door led to the wool platform. The man tiptoed to it quickly, and without a backward glance passed outside. A second later the stranger was shaking Vin back to consciousness.

"I want a room, *muchacho*," he said with some impatience.

Vin blinked his eyes. "No room, *señor*. Theese hotel is feel up. Plenty men in town."

"I'm not stayin' all night. It's goin' to rain. I'll go on after the stormin's done. You let me have one of the boys' rooms. They won't be turnin' in till late. I'm dead tired."

"Sure, Mike! I guess we feex leetla theeng like that. You take the end room. I call you nine o'clock."

The Basque turned to fish out from a pile of soiled papers a dilapidated book which served the place as a register.

"You put your name in theese book, *señor*."

He held it toward the man, pencil in his free hand. The stranger's eyes held Vin's as he took the book and pencil; but instead of writing as requested, he closed the book and put the pencil on top of it, after which he placed them with extravagant care on the polished bar.

Vin started to protest, but the man's squinting, smiling gray eyes made him pause. Damn these gringos when they smile!

"No," the stranger was saying. "*Niente, señor*. I've just clean fergot how to write. You understand?"

"*Si, si*." Escondido was not lying. He understood the *eyes*. It was sufficient. Then, with a shrug of the shoulders and a grin: "Me, I pretty dam' well fergot how to read somethings, too."

"*Señor*, you are a man of wisdom."

A few minutes later, having removed his boots and draped his gun belt and hat over a convenient chair, the man was asleep. Neither the noise from the platform nor the heavy smell of creosote drifting in through the open window disturbed him. He had been in the saddle twelve hours that day.

The freshening wind and the gathering clouds to the north bore unmistakable promise of approaching storm. This would have caused him no concern. He had foreseen it and molded his plans to its whim. A conversation going on in a cabin across the tracks would have been of infinitely more interest. He was the subject of that talk; one of the two thus engaged being the man who had stolen out of the Palace bar.

"I tell you it's him," he repeated doggedly from time to time. "Ain't no ghosts scarin' me thataway. It's Crosbie Traynor."

"And him dead these twenty years?"

"I thought he was dead. Men left on the Painted Desert without water and no food don't come back. He's done it, though! It's him. Still wearin' one of my old hats—the one with

that Moqui horsehair band. You remember—had a gold snake luck piece snapped on to the band. I tell you he looks like the livin' spit of the way he did that night down on the Little Colorado."

His companion said nothing, but the sweat of fear had broken on his forehead. Crosbie Traynor's return to the land of living men was as ominous as those black clouds gathering to the north. Death walked in the air.

The little schemes, the plotting, the treachery of twenty years now crumbled to ruins! Not for a second was it to be supposed that Traynor had come to Standing Rock by accident. The man's country lay far to the south, hundreds of miles. Yes, it was his way to ferret them out, to hang on, drifting from town to town until he tracked them down.

"Damn you for a bungling fool!" cursed the brooding one. The man from the hotel sank lower into his chair, spineless, impotent in the face of that ghost-man's visit. He raised his hands to shield his eyes from his companion's wrath as the other went on:

“A bungling, white-livered fool! That’s what you are! Now we’ll be lucky if our necks don’t get stretched.”

“What you goin’ to do?”

“Do?” The man got to his feet and shook his fist in his visitor’s face. “I’m going to do what you tried to do. I’m going to get Traynor before he gets me. Is that plain enough for you?”

“You—you goin’ to kill him?”

“Oh, bah!” the other hurled back with fine contempt. “That scares you, huh? Where’ll you be if he ever gets wind of you? That makes you shiver, eh? Well, you get this idea under your hat and let it stick there—you’re taking orders from me. ‘Cross’ Traynor is going to be erased!”

CHAPTER II.

THE RED HAND.

DARKNESS came, bringing the day's work to an end. The commotion on the wool platform ceased. Down the tracks from the direction of the shipping pens came the Diamond-Bar boys. They had just put ten hours of hard work behind them, but one would not have guessed it from their present vociferousness.

Johnny Allerdyce, or rather Johnny Dice—to give him what he called his "*nom devoid*"—led the column headed for the Palace. He was walking the ties, taking three of them at a step. Behind him some fifteen of his pals were strung out at varying intervals.

Johnny's legs were pronouncedly bowed from his life in a saddle, and this long-stepping walk, or half run, only accentuated his deformity. Big hat flapping in the wind, the tails of his neckerchief flattening out behind him, made him seem

grotesque. But there was action in every line of him, untouched vitality. Freckled face, untamed hair of flaming hue—they were fit companions for his dancing, mischievous eyes.

“Hi, hi, you gamblin’ fool,” some one in back of him yelled. “I hope you stub your toe and break yore damned haid. You let me know how the town is when you git there!”

“You tell him, cowboy!” Johnny flung over his shoulder. “I crave food and pleasure!”

Laughter of marked contempt greeted this retort. Somebody cried: “Liar!” Johnny was strictly a night-blooming plant; this talk of food was just talk.

At the hotel, Vin was going about lighting the lamps. No one ever locked a door. In turn, he left a light in Crosbie Traynor’s room. The sleeper had not moved. Vin surveyed him calmly, wondering if he had ever seen the man before. Without his hat, Traynor seemed older. Vincenzo shrugged his shoulders as he turned away. The man was a total stranger to him. And still this mysterious *señor* aroused the Basque’s curiosity.

Vin had been on the desert too long not to have learned the wisdom of keeping his own counsel; but he took much pleasure from building romantic adventures around his guests. Some *señors* there had been who were in great haste. He had sped them on their way. But they were not forgotten.

This man was in no seeming haste, but something about him sent delicious little chills racing up and down Vin's spine. He would have spent more time on the matter had not Scanlon called to him at the moment. Johnny and the other Diamond-Bar warriors had arrived. In this democratic inn the proprietors—or to be exact, one of them—served the meals. His name was not Scanlon, that individual confining his efforts to the well-known cash register and the dealing of much poker.

Jackson Kent, the big boss of the Diamond-Bar, came in before supper was over. He was a hawk-faced old man, silent as a rule. Hobe Ferris, his foreman, was with him. Pushing back the knife and fork set before him, the old man

began stacking five, ten, and twenty dollar gold pieces into neat little piles. This was pay night.

Some of the boys had not drawn a cent in three months. Hobe called off their names and the amounts due, and old man Kent counted it out to them as they filed past. The owner of the Diamond-Bar caressed his little stacks of gold pieces with his fingers as the piles grew smaller and smaller. He caught Scanlon eyeing him.

"Might jest as well be payin' him," he muttered to Hobe, shaking his head regretfully. "What a waste of good money this is," he added. "Won't a one of 'em have a cent left time they git back to the ranch."

"You ain't includin' Johnny in that remark, be you?" Hobe demanded. "Ain't one of the boys but owes him plenty cash right now. He'll git more of their jack tonight."

"Huh!" the old man grunted. "Huh!" His contempt for Johnny's genius was of long standing. "Somebody 'll git him jest like he gits these fools. Gamblin's made a smart aleck out of him. Always figurin' how things is goin' to break; talkin' his head off about the laws of chance. Jest

spoiled a good hand, that's all gamblin's done to Johnny Dice. His mind ain't on cattle no more. Damn it, Hobe, half the time I believe he don't know whether he's runnin' sheep or steers."

Hobe was a good foreman, so he wisely agreed with the old man. He had been doing this for ten years; a time in which the Diamond-Bar had prospered.

"Don't let 'em git too drunk, Hobe," Kent cautioned as he began his supper. "We got work to do to-morrow mornin'. The Lawrence boys will be here with their stuff by noon. We've got to git out of the way."

Hobe nodded as he strolled to the bar. "We'll be in the clear, I reckon," he drawled. "Hain't had no trouble yit."

Hobe Ferris had long since forgotten the knack of smiling, but he almost remembered it as he thought of the old man's concern for his men.

"Old age certainly uses y'u up, don't it?" he mused. "Yes, sir! Think of him worryin' thataway. If this keeps up, Miss Molly 'll be bossin' the brand 'fore long."

Ferris looked about for Johnny, but he and his

pal, Tony Madeiras, had gone down the street. There were other places of chance in Standing Rock, and wise Johnny was off to a picking.

Stuffy Tyler, who had raced through his supper and who had been busy ever since refreshing himself at the bar, greeted his foreman with a hearty smack on the back.

"Y'u again?" Hobe queried.

"Little me, Hobe."

And then, without further ado, he roared that old range song, the first two lines of which run:

"Oh, no, Jenny!

What would yore father say?"

Hobe knew what father said, and he was not minded to listen to his complaint this night. A wooden awning stretched across the walk in front of the hotel. There, the foreman found refuge from Stuffy's bawling.

The storm clouds which had been gathering to the north had circled round to the west; but they were nearer now. Far away, a mile or more, the steel rails of the Espee main line began to dance

in the glow of a powerful headlight. A second later the light itself appeared. It was the freight that would roll away with those loaded cars of wool and those others filled with Diamond-Bar's steers.

For a brief moment the light seemed to pause there on the brink of the wide valley. Another second and it was dashing down upon Standing Rock.

Its coming was dramatic, and it held Hobe's attention. Suddenly the speeding circle of light was dimmed. It was rain. Not a drop had fallen, as yet, where he sat. But there, a quarter of a mile away, was the coming storm, racing the train into town.

The engineer blew for the station before the rain began to spatter down in the dry dust of the street in front of the hotel. A few seconds later the big mogul engine, panting and puffing, came to a grinding stop fifteen feet from where Ferris sat.

Inside the hotel things were humming. Scanlon was playing cards; Vin was hammering a stac-

cato tune on the cash register. Two partners could hardly have been more profitably engaged.

A man skulking in the shadows across the tracks wondered at the big fellow sitting there on the porch, getting wet beyond a doubt, refraining from joining the sport of his pals. He had recognized the big man as Ferris. For the second time he wondered if the foreman by any chance might be watching him.

The storm became heavier. The high wind in back of it began to send the rain with such force that the wooden awning no longer offered any protection. Reluctantly, Hobe arose and went inside.

The man, who had been waiting for him to go in, speedily crossed the tracks and made for the wool platform in back of the hotel. For a person of his age, he was spry. Picking up a wool hook, he noiselessly climbed over the tops of the loaded freighters until he was abreast one of the freight cars.

With remarkable quickness he crawled to the top of it. Flat on his stomach he lay, peering into the darkness, trying to make certain that his movements were unwatched. The rain beat into

his face so violently that he had to raise his hand to protect his eyes.

His roving glance found nothing to disturb him. In the inky blackness the warehouse beside the platform bulked dark and forbidding. From its protecting shadows to where he lay now his path had not crossed any chance ray of light.

Turning on his side, he surveyed the hotel. Curtains flapped in the second story windows; flickering yellow light streamed through them. The wind eddied every now and then, bidding fair to extinguish the lamps Vin had lighted; but, with the persistency of oil wicks, they fluttered on.

A thankful curse escaped the man as he observed the open windows. He wondered why Vin had not been up to close them. He knew the Basque's habits.

Far down the track at the shipping pens the train crew was switching the loaded cars. Ten minutes and they would be back here, moving this very car on which he lay. Ten minutes—it was enough. He had but to walk these five loaded wool cars to sweep the interior of the Palace Hotel. If the man he sought slept within—well, it

wouldn't take ten minutes to finish this little errand.

From the edge of the big freight cars he could reach out and touch the wall of the hotel. Grasping the steel hook with which he had provided himself, he began to move toward the lighted windows.

Seconds slipped by as he came abreast the first window before he satisfied himself that the room was unoccupied. On hands and knees, drawing himself forward noiselessly, he crept on. An even longer time did he pause before passing the second window. He began to wonder if the man he sought had gone downstairs. He knew he had been in his room twenty minutes ago. Rather, he had believed as much, inasmuch as the man had not been in the bar.

Subconsciously he became aware of the approaching engine. It drove him forward. With half the caution he had used in surveying the other rooms, he stared into the third one. Something stuck in his throat as he beheld Crosbie Traynor sound asleep on the narrow bed, his head within a foot of the window.

Black hatred leaped in the man's soul as he stared at the sleeping Traynor. This was going to be almost too easy! There had been moments in his approach to this spot in which his determination to go through with his mission had wavered; his hands had shaken.

That was gone now. He not only wanted to kill, but he found himself able to restrain his desire—to snuggle it to his heart, to wait for the propitious second, to do the deed cleverly. It was a revelation to the man. He had never suspected himself of such metal.

He had drawn his gun, but he put it back. Wisdom was guiding him. The long steel wool hook became his weapon. Reaching into the room with it, he picked Traynor's belt and loaded holster from its perch on the chair beside the bed. Next he secured the hat the sleeping man had worn.

The feel of it infuriated him. Savagely he ripped away the band and the gold charm snapped into it. He threw the hat back into the room. It would have pleased him to have hurled the little gold snake into the blackness, but that was the very sort of thing he had told himself a minute ago

he had mastered. So the little charm went into his pocket.

With the steel hook, he replaced Traynor's gun belt, minus the gun. The engine, with its string of cattle cars, bumped into the line of cars on which he lay as he drew back from depositing the holster. For a second he wavered, fighting to regain his balance. He could hear the air shooting through the brakes. This car would be moving in another moment. A brakeman ran down alongside the train. Thanks to the rain he had not come across the tops!

Some one shouted, a lantern waved, the train tensed as if to spring forward. A grinding, tearing sound, the lurching of the big car, and then the long-drawn, piercing whistle.

It was for this he had waited. Reaching in through the window, he fired!

Gloating, wholly evil, the murderer's face gleamed in the streaming light. The train was moving—taking him away to safety. The sound of the shot has been lost, dimmed by the noise of the storm and the piercing blast of the whistle.

He had played it to the last line! Cross Tray-

nor had been erased. There'd be no coming back this time. He saw him half out of bed, his head on the floor—a gory relic of what had been a man.

With an easy toss the killer dropped the dead man's gun to the floor beside the body. That was the last, final touch! It made the slayer smile.

“That's that, I guess. Dead—and by his own gun, too! Cross, you'll never come back now.”

The train was gathering speed. The man flattened himself out. At the shipping pens the freight moved upon the main track. This slowing down was the awaited moment. Unseen, the man who had killed so easily slipped to the ground. The wool hook which had served him so well was tossed into the sage. Then, with sure step, he moved away in the night. This affair was a thing of the past. Who was there to question him?

CHAPTER III.

BY HIS OWN HAND.

IN the Palace bar all was merry. To the casual eye Scanlon might have appeared an exception, a frosted flower in a garden of flaming blooms; but even his moroseness was giving way to a sly smile. Four mysterious aces had but recently appeared in Stub Rawlings's hand. The Scanlon bank roll had been severely injured. The source of that handful of cards had sorely troubled the red-headed boss of the Palace. He had become conscious of the storm raging without, but he had not so much as cast a glance at the streaming windows. Mr. Rawlings's play was of greater interest.

Lady Luck began to smile on the house. Scanlon's stack of blue chips increased to dizzy heights. He now held Mr. Rawlings's aces. He played them much better than Stub had. In fact, so well did he maneuver that when the Diamond-

Bar man called, the game was over as far as Stub was concerned.

In the interval Scanlon flashed questioning eyes at the windows. Impatiently then he called to Vin: "The windows, Vin! Upstairs—shut the windows! This damn place 'll be floatin' away if you don't."

Vin had been much the busier of the two. But that was as usual. He scowled now, though. Scanlon had been piling straws on the Basque's back for some years. This threatened to be the one too many. To-morrow he would brood over any damage done to the hotel; but now he was angry only with Scanlon. "*Madre de Dios!*" he growled. "I do all these worries for theese firm. I scrub those floors, I mak' those bed, I wash those window—by Chris', I not close them."

"Aw, go on, Vinnie," the boisterous Stuffey exclaimed, "and be damn glad you ain't livin' in Awregon where they really got rain."

"That's him!" Scanlon snorted. "Always tellin' what he does round here. Jest workin' yerself to death, ain't yuh? Humph! If it wasn't fer my brains we wouldn't have no hotel." He turned

back to his game. "Let 'er rain," he roared. "I can swim."

This indifference to their mutual prosperity seared the Basque's soul, but he rolled up his apron and started for the stairs, the air blue with his cursing. "By damn, I soon git my own hotel, you Irish gringo!" he hurled at his partner.

The crowd tittered. Vin's troubles were well understood. A moment later the Basque was back at the head of the stairs, white of face, hands shaking.

"*Socorro*—help! Man ees keel heemself! I guess you come like hell now, Scanlon."

A hush fell upon the crowded barroom. Little noises were stilled until only the soft slip-slip of the cards running through Scanlon's fingers broke the silence. Sudden, or mysterious, death was quite as chilling in Standing Rock as in more sophisticated circles.

The tension held for a brief spell. Hobe Ferris was the first to move. A moment later the crowd was pouring up the stairs.

Traynor lay as the killer had left him—half out of bed, his gun near his lifeless hand.

Scanlon bent over and examined the powder marks on the man's forehead. "Never seen him before," said he as he straightened up. "This is Stuffy's room, Vin. How'd *he* git up here?"

"Man came 'fore supper. Say he only want to sleep till the rain ees past. I say take theese room. What diff'rence eet make? Stuffy not go to baid to-night."

"You said somethin', Vinnie. I ain't ever goin' to sleep in *that* bed."

"Dry up," Hobe ordered. "We'd better git Doc Ritter. The doc and the old man are playin' pinochle in his office. I saw 'em across the street. Run over and git him, Stub."

"Ain't no need gittin' a doctor," Scanlon said positively. "This is a job for the coroner. The man's as dead as a man can git. Gallup is the only one that can be of any use here."

"Yeh, I guess yo're right, Scanlon. Fine lookin' man, that. Wonder where he came from? Ain't none of y'u boys ever seen him?"

The crowd edged closer to the dead man; but no one seemed to remember him.

"I'll go for Gallup," Stub offered. "He'll sure

be riled, gittin' out of bed this time of the night. He goes to the hay with the chickens."

Stub's going seemed to unloosen the crowd's tongue. A dozen conjectures were voiced, and either denied or affirmed. Hobe brought them up, standing, by his discovery that no one had heard the shot which had killed the man.

Scanlon turned on his partner, his mouth sagging a trifle. This thing had a queer draw to it. "Vin," he argued, "you ain't been out of the house. Didn't you hear nothin'?"

"I don' hear anyt'ing. But theese *señor* have foony look in hees eye. Mak' me feel leetla chill in the back. I ask hees name; *Caramba!* He say he ees pretty well forget how to mak' those writings in book."

"Sort of a mysterious gent, eh?" Scanlon asked, unpleasantly.

"His name's his own business," Hobe flared back. "He might have been considerate enough to bump hisself off somewheres else; but I pretty well wouldn't like to have anybody tellin' me my name wa'n't my own business."

The Diamond-Bar foreman rightly suspected

that Scanlon's annoyance was largely due to the fact that this affair would throw a wet blanket on the spending of money. He had been waiting some three months for this harvest.

Gallup, the coroner, and Stub returned at this moment, and Scanlon was saved replying to the challenge in Hobe's words.

"What's all the trouble?" Gallup demanded when he had entered the room.

"It's a job for you, Aaron," Ferris replied. "Vin just found him a few minutes ago."

Gallup surveyed the dead man.

"Humph! Did a good job, didn't he? Guess he wouldn't 'a' been no deader in the mornin'. Gittin' so I can't git a good night's sleep no more."

"Yo're still drawin' down yore wages reg'lar, ain't yuh?"

Old Aaron wiped his nose with the back of his hand at this query from Ferris.

"Sorta reg'lar, Hobe," Gallup answered with a wise little smile. "All due to me, though. Any man that can git fifteen hundred a year out of this county has earned it. If you folks ever start raisin' my wages I'm goin' to quit cold."

While he talked, Gallup had been examining the dead man's clothes and his gun.

"This bird sure knew what he was doin'," he muttered. "Ain't a mark on him to identify him. Queer old gun he used. Well, we got men enough here. I guess I'll swear you in and git done right now."

"We're shy one, Aaron," said Hobe. "Where's Johnny? Ought to have him, he's so *up* on these things."

"Him and Tony's over to the Bud. They'll be comin' soon as the news gits round."

"I got enough," Aaron answered. "Johnny Dice ain't law-abidin' no more, anyhow."

Without further delay he began swearing them to the truth. Before he had finished the jingle of spur chains below caught Scanlon's ear. "There's someone now." He went to the stairs and looked down. "Say, Johnny, you're just in time. Need another man up here."

"Surest thing, old dear. What's the limit?"

"No limit. It's a dead man. Gallup's here."

"Do I know him?" demanded Johnny.

"No one's ever clapped eyes on him 'cept Vin. But he don't know nothin', either."

Johnny had stopped to shake the rain from his hat. He turned now to Madeiras. "Come on, Tony. What you grumblin' about?"

Tony smiled. "I t'ought Scanlon say Gallup ees daid."

"You sound disappointed. What you cookin' up for old Aaron?"

"You forget my name, Johnny. I am a Madeiras. There ees lots of Madeiras."

"Still thinkin' 'bout that, eh? You best tell your people not to borrow no money from Aaron. He's a money hound, boy. I tell yuh he knows those gents on the greenbacks personal."

Tony tapped his chest. "Somet'ings we don't forget, Johnny."

They were upstairs by this time. Aaron scowled at the Basque, but he chose him in preference to Johnny.

"One of you is all I need," the old man muttered. Johnny was defeated, but not stilled.

"They certainly keep you busy, don't they, Aaron?" he asked provokingly.

"That 'll be enough talk from you, Johnny," Gallup snapped. "If you want to stay in the room you keep still."

"Serves me right. The idea of a loose character like me tryin' to edge in on the law! Ain't no hard feelin's on my part, Aaron."

The old man ignored this sally.

"Now, Vinnie, you tell us how you found this man," he began in a more or less official manner.

Vin explained how he had come up to close the windows, and so forth.

"You hain't touched nothin'?"

"No, I call downstairs right away I see he ees daid."

"Humph! Nobody here knows this man, either, eh?" He cleared his throat importantly.

"Well, gentlemen, there don't seem to be no use wastin' any more time. This man came here intendin' to kill himself. It ain't accidental-like for a man to go round without some mark of identification on him. He cut off every sign by which he might be traced. He's got his watch and his money; so it wa'n't robbery. And you all see where the powder burned his forehead. The

gun's there on the floor, just where he dropped it, too. Guess that makes the answer plain. Best you bring in the usual verdict; death by his own hand, this day and date. That agreed?"

A muttered chorus of assenting grunts greeted him as he began making out the death certificate.

"Say, Aaron," Johnny interrupted. "There's somethin' under the bed. The man's hat, I reckon."

Aaron glanced at him over the rims of his glasses.

"Why don't you wait a little longer? You ain't tongue-tied, be yuh?"

"You told me to shut up."

"Little good comes from tellin' you."

The old man grunted as he crawled beneath the bed to recover the hat.

"It's a hat, all right," he grumbled. "His hat, no doubt. Ain't a mark on it, though." He held it up for his jury to gaze at it. Jest about proves what I contend. The man wanted to die unidentified."

Tony Madeiras's eyes bulged as he saw the hat Gallup held aloft. Pushing his way forward he

took the hat in his hand. Gallup watched him closely.

"Son of a gun!" Madeiras exclaimed slowly and turned to face his friends. "I change my min' about those daid man. I know thees hat!"

"What?" exclaimed Johnny.

"*Si*. I know thees hat. Only t'ree, four days ago I see eet."

"Yeh!" There was open doubt of the Basque puncher's word in the coroner's voice. "You remember a hat without a band or mark on it that you saw three or four days ago? It ain't even a grown-up hat. It's just a little runt of a thing. But you remember it, Madeiras?"

Tony's eyes narrowed as he answered the old man. "I said I remember theese hat."

"Well, you've got some memory, bosco."

Big Hobe put his hand upon Gallup's shoulder as the coroner gave tongue to the western term of contempt for the Basque.

"Listen here, Aaron. You won't make no friends for yoreself with that kind of talk. This Diamond-Bar bunch don't exactly like to hear Tony called a bosco. It ain't good for the health

to say it more than oncé. You git that? Now if Tony allows he remembers that hat it ain't up to you to call him a liar."

"That's all right, Hobe," Tony smiled. "Maybe some time he find out my people have pretty damn good memory. What he thinks, I don't care. But for you, Hobe: last Monday I was on the North Fork. Evening time I come down to the river. Theese man be there. He have plenty hair on hees face then. Big whiskers. He spik Spanish. Ask lots of question. Me, I ask some, too. He come long ways theese man."

"You find out his name?"

"Tony Madeiras don' ask man hees name."

"Good for you, Tony," Johnny called. "It ain't bein' done."

Gallup turned on Johnny with face flaming.

"If I hear any more talk from you, out you go. This is your crowd, but the law is the law, and I ain't goin' to stand no impudence from you."

Doc Ritter and Jackson Kent came in as Gallup admonished Johnny. The coroner nodded to Kent.

"Maybe you can put some sense into him," he said, pointing to Johnny Dice.

"What's the matter, Johnny?" asked Kent. "We just heard a man had killed himself up here."

"Nothin' the matter with me. Gallup's runnin' things here. And he ain't makin' no hit with it, either. Hobe had to call him a minute ago."

"Mr. Gallup's a good man, boys. Don't rear and tear too much. Jest what is wrong, Aaron?"

When Gallup had finished explaining, the Diamond-Bar owner did his best to restore harmony.

"Now you go on, Tony, and tell the coroner what you know," he said, pleadingly. "We don't want no run-in with the law."

"That's sense," Gallup seconded. "If you saw this man, and talked with him, tell us what he said."

"Well, he say—er—he say——" Johnny Dice was coughing so violently that Tony could not go on. The Basque turned on his pal questioningly. Johnny was bent nearly double; but Tony caught the wink and the slight shake of the head which were meant for him. He started to speak again:

"Well, he say how ees the cattle? How ees the water? How ees the sheep? How ees——"

"I don't care about that," Gallup growled. "Did he say anythin' that has any bearin' on this case? We ain't interested in anythin' else."

"No—I guess not. All he say ees how ees these, how ees that?"

"Then all this talk's been for nothin'. What do you say, men? Are you satisfied it's suicide or not? Raise your hands if you are."

Tony saw that Johnny was telling him to say yes. When the Basque's hand went up, Gallup turned to Doc Ritter.

"Here's your papers, doc. Take the body any time you want to."

Aaron scrawled his signature and handed the certificate to the town's doctor and undertaker.

Gallup read aloud:

"Party unknown. Died this 4th of October by his own hand; no reason given. The foregoing being the sworn verdict of the jury convened by me on this day and date.

"(Signed) AARON GALLUP,
"Coroner of Shoshone County, State of Nevada."

Aaron paused to glance at his listeners. "There' it is, gentlemen; in *my* own hand." He smiled

superiorly. "Somebody count the man's money and we'll adjourn."

He glanced at Kent, but the old man was staring at the body.

"You oblige me, Jackson?" Gallup asked.

"No," he muttered; "let Doc do it. I don't fancy counting a dead man's money."

Old Aaron smiled. "All right," he drawled patiently. "Guess Doc ain't so finicky. He knows that dead men don't hurt no one."

CHAPTER IV.

FOOT-LOOSE.

THE crowd began trooping downstairs as Doc put the body back on the bed and covered it. Johnny Dice shook his head as he turned to follow his friends. There was something wrong about this affair. He felt it long before he was able to put his fingers on anything definitely suspicious. His tilt with Gallup was of no consequence. The old man disliked him because he refused to take the coroner seriously. And then, too, Johnny and Tony had been stringing along for some years. Aaron had foreclosed a small mortgage on one of Tony's relatives. That made bad blood between them.

Johnny's suspicions crystallized as Doc lifted the body. He saw a bit of evidence that no man on earth could contradict. His nerves began to tingle. This man had not killed himself!

Gallup caught the grim smile on Johnny's face.

"What you waitin' for?" he asked.

Johnny continued to smile provokingly. "Ain't no one sittin' up for you at home, is there, Aaron?"

The old man's face went scarlet at this continued heckling.

"By God," he cried, "I wisht I was twenty years younger! You'd stop your insolence."

"That's so, Aaron. I forgot that. I'm sorry."

Johnny meant it, too. The old man was an almost helpless target. Johnny stooped to hide his chagrin and picked a little curl of wool from the floor.

The action had been unpremeditated, but as his fingers closed upon the tuft of wool it became charged with importance. Too late. Johnny tried to palm it. Aaron saw him.

"What's that you're pickin' up?" he demanded.

"A piece of the golden fleece—I mean the creosoted fleece," Johnny said with a laugh. "Want it?"

"'Course not, you idiot."

"You'd better go downstairs, Johnny," Kent advised. "You and Gallup remind me of a pair of

clawin' cats. If you ain't got no respect for old age, you ought to have for the law, and them that represents it."

Something in Kent's tone made Johnny resent this advice.

"Respect for the law?" he asked. "I'm plumb hostile to law when it gits as stupid as this. I pick up that bit of wool, and what does it mean to him? Nothin'! Well, it ought to."

"How so?" Gallup snapped.

"There ain't been no sheepman in here to-night. It's wet outside. The wind ain't blowin' wet wool into this room. How'd that piece of fleece git here? And while I'm about it, no one has proved to me that this gent killed hisself. I could have slipped up here and bumped him off while he slept, held the gun close enough to singe hair, too. Droppin' it on the floor as I went out wouldn't take no brains at all."

"What you think don't interest me," old Aaron said hotly. "Vin was downstairs. He'd have known if any one came up here."

"You run along, Johnny," Kent again urged.

"Somehow I just don't like bein' told to mind

my own business thataway," Johnny flared, losing his own temper. "I want to tell Doc and the rest of you that that man couldn't have killed hisself—leastwise, not like this."

"Couldn't?" Doc Ritter echoed.

"That's what I said—couldn't! That bird was a left-handed gent. Left-handed men ain't shootin' themselves in the right temple! 'By his own hand'!" Johnny repeated Gallup's words with fine contempt. "Oh, hell! Are you fools or what? This man was murdered—shot down in cold blood!"

"Ain't nobody but a smart aleck like you tellin' that a dead man was left-handed," the coroner roared.

"Oh, you didn't know he was left-handed, then?" Johnny sneered. "You wouldn't! You never know! Coroners just don't. They're the lowest form of political infamy. All I got to know about a man is that he's hired out to do a job of coronering to know that there ain't no help for him."

Gallup's teeth fairly chattered with rage. Face

working convulsively, he turned to the body as Johnny pointed to it.

“Look at the man’s pants, you old mossback!” Johnny exclaimed, excitedly. “Ain’t they all wore shiny on the left side just below the pocket? Nothing but the rubbin’ of his holster against that leg did that. And that worn-out place beside the pocket—the butt of his gun made that! Roll him over, Ritter, and let this poor old imbecile have a good look.”

Doc rolled the body so that they could see if this was so. Gallup’s face was red with rage. Was this upstart cow-puncher going to cheapen him and make his work ridiculous? Election wasn’t so far away, said Ritter’s eyes. Gallup caught the thought.

Old Kent was wringing his hands. Hobe and Tony said nothing, but their set faces were proof enough that Johnny Dice had dropped a bomb-shell.

No one seemed willing to break the silence which had crept over them. It grew so still that Gallup’s little throat noises sounded loud and

ominous. He was weighing matters quite beyond the present trouble with Johnny.

"Well, Johnny," he said at last in a tone very different from the one he had previously used, "there may be sense in your contention. No one can say what was so with a dead man and be sure of it. I never seen him wearin' a gun; you never seen him, either. Tell me why anybody 'd want to kill him. Sure wasn't robbery."

"Might have been robbery," Johnny replied. "Forty-six dollars ain't no money for a man to have on him in this country. It would have been a fine stall to have taken his roll and left that measly forty-six. And then, too, maybe somebody figured he had somethin' on them. Might be a dozen reasons."

"You don't suspect any one, do you, Johnny?" Doc asked.

"You don't have to suspect somebody to prove that murder's been done."

"Yes, Johnny," Gallup cut in, "but you ain't proved that murder's been committed. You talk a lot, but it's all guesswork."

"Wouldn't be guesswork very long with me."

"You git that idea out of yore head," Kent warned. "If yo're workin' for me you won't have no time to go runnin' around doin' business the county pays some one else to do."

Hobe saw the insurgent answer leaping to Johnny's lips and he tried to stop it but he was too late.

"If you mean I've got the choice of bein' fired or lettin' somebody else do my thinkin' for me—well, then, I'm fired."

"Yore words don't surprise me," Kent cried. "I told Hobe this evenin' that you'd bear watchin'."

"That's the blow-off," Johnny said, angrily. "Ridin' for you ain't the thing I'm fondest of."

"Yo're talkin' big now; you got a few dollars in yore pocket. You'll go busted quick enough. Takes money to mind other folks' business."

"You're as bad as he is, Jackson," Ritter interrupted. "I ain't so sure the boy isn't right. If you need any money, Johnny, you let me know."

This offer of assistance made Gallup chortle.

"I won't want any money, Doc," drawled Johnny. "A good horse and a pair of well-oiled

guns are all I'll need. I'm goin' to find out who killed this man. How about it, Tony?"

"Eef you say so, Johnny, she's so wit' me."

"Go to it, you young fool!" Aaron managed to articulate. "Kelsey's in Reno. He'll be back next week. Go see him! Maybe he'll make you special investigator for this county."

"I don't have to see no prosecutin' attorney!" Johnny's words clicked off his tongue. "What I do, I'll do on my own. If this man was murdered—by God, I'm goin' to find out who killed him! It 'll be time enough to talk of seein' Kelsey then!"

CHAPTER V.

THE FIRST CLEW.

SCANLON's fear that the night was ruined as far as he was concerned proved well founded. Gallup paused to buy himself a drink. Kent and his foreman came down as the coroner went out. Hobe's face was glum. The old man's run-in with Johnny and his pal was only another evidence of his coming decay. For all of his fault, Johnny was a good man, and a better *vaquero* than Madeiras was not to be found this side of the Humboldt. Kent might figure that, come spring, they would be back asking to be taken on again. Hobe knew better than this. Johnny's pride more than matched his temper.

Times there had been in the past when old Jackson Kent had not balked at winking an eye at the law. This present deference to it nettled Hobe. The Diamond-Bar was big and powerful enough to lay down its own law. No one more than Fer-

ris had built up its traditions. A few men there are like him who can become so much a part of their work that a subconscious sense of ownership of the tools with which they toil takes possession of them. It was that way with Hobe. He was the Diamond-Bar.

Kent's daughter, Molly, had healed some previous sore spots between the foreman and the old man, but this arbitrary handling of the Diamond-Bar men was poaching on authority long since held by the foreman. Kent would have been hard put to have found a way to hurt the man more.

"You better git the boys to bed," the old man said.

Hobe's face was sullen.

"Yes, sir." It was the first time in years that Hobe had "sirred" the boss. Kent looked at him sharply, feeling the implied unfriendliness. He had the good sense, though, to say nothing.

Five minutes later the barroom was clear of Diamond-Bar men. Stuffy Tyler had fallen asleep, but big Hobe easily picked him up, and throwing him over his shoulder as if the man were a sack of meal, carried him to his bed.

Doc Ritter brought in a stretcher, and with the aid of Johnny and Tony, the dead man was carried to Ritter's undertaking parlor.

Scanlon and Vin faced each other.

"Beats hell, don't it," the former asked sullenly, "how one man can put a town to bed? You'd almost think we knew the man—comin' in here and dyin' thata-way. You know what we stand to lose, don't you?"

"We don' lose not'in', Scanlon. Money? We get heem by an' by. Next election, though, we lose somet'ing."

"Gallup, eh? Maybe so. The man ain't got no ideas. You 'tend to the lights and close up, Vin. I'm dead tired. I'm goin' to bed."

"Let 'em burn," the Basque snapped. "I can swim!"

Scanlon smiled as he recognized his own words of the early evening. But Vinnie put out the lights.

For half an hour after the hotel was in darkness, Johnny and Tony sat in front of the Palace. The rain was over.

"You go to baid, Johnny?" Tony asked.

"No. I couldn't sleep. Tell me again just what that man said to you that night on the North Fork."

The big Basque smiled. He had already told his story twice.

"I jus' remember I look at hees hat, and he smile. That's fonny hat, you know—so small brim, great beeg crown. No mens wear hats like those now. He geeve it to me for tak' good look. The ban' on eet is ver-ry fine. 'Yes,' he say, 'that's Indian ban'. Moqui Indian mak' those ban'. Mak' eet out of horsehair.'

"But more fonny that those hat is little green snake he have fasten on that ban'. That snake have green eyes. Eet's a gold snake, too. 'Press the haid of that snake,' he say. *Por Dios*, that snake fall into my han.' 'That's beeg medicine,' he say, 'those snake. Been on that hat forty year!'

"'Why you wear those old hat?' I ask. He tell me; but he don' smile. 'Plenty hats like theese, long time ago in Santa Fe and Tombstone,' he say. 'Some day I fin' the man what owns theese hat. He'll remember eet!' "

"Yuh can't git away from it, Tony," Johnny exclaimed. "He was lookin' for somebody, and that somebody got him. Horsehair hat-bands ain't uncommon. He wouldn't have ripped it off his hat to keep folks from rememberin' it. That Indian snake was what he'd have hid and he'd have unsnapped it and put it in his pants. But it's against all sense to believe that he took off even the snake. He wanted to be recognized."

Johnny slapped his knee emphatically. "I tell you," he declared, "the man what killed him tore off that band!"

Tony shrugged his shoulders. "*Quien sabe!*" he muttered.

Johnny was still for a minute. Then suddenly: "Say! That man had a horse when he came here. He didn't walk into town."

"*Diga*, Johnny! He have beeg horse—Spanish horse."

"Come on! I'm goin' to find him. The man must have had a bed-roll or a saddle-bag. We'll have a look-see."

The places in Standing Rock where a man might stable a horse were not so numerous that

it took Johnny and Tony any great time to find the big stallion. He was in Ed Brackett's barn.

It was Johnny's intention to become possessed of the man's personal effects if any there should be. For this very excellent reason he entered the barn without disturbing Brackett.

Tony immediately recognized the big horse. The stallion eyed them nervously. A flow of liquid Spanish from the Basque reassured the horse. Johnny searched the pegs along the wall for the missing roll. A low word to Tony told the Basque that he had found what they came for.

"Come on," came the whisper. "We'll drift back to the hotel and look this stuff over."

In their little room in the Palace they sorted out the man's belongings—shirts, socks, handkerchiefs, and a little bag containing a sewing kit and odds and ends a lone man might be expected to carry.

"Not much here," Johnny said slowly. "Seems like a man would carry somethin' personal. Anyways, it proves he didn't hide that hat-band or Indian luck piece. It 'd be here if he had."

Tony grunted in answer. Johnny picked up a

shirt to stuff it back into the leather bag. As he did so a black wallet slipped out and fell upon the bed.

"There's somet'in'," the Basque exclaimed.

"Four hundred dollars! He wasn't robbed, Tony! And here's a picture—a kid's picture!"

Tony crowded close to look at it.

"That's too bad," muttered Johnny. "Thought maybe I might recognize it. That was hopin' for too much. But it'll help some day. That's a clew! I'll just freeze on to it."

Putting the small photograph into his pocket, he proceeded to replace the other things in the old saddlebag. Tony watched him for several minutes. The Basque's face showed dismay. At times he could not understand his gringo friend. He felt ignored now. Johnny caught the signs of distress.

"But, Tony, you didn't know the kid. You was back in that dear Spain when that little photo was snapped. *Muchachito*, you go to bed. Tomorrow we got plenty work to do. I got a clew now."

"Clew? Damn my soul, Johnny, you talk like deeteckteeve."

"*Companero*, you string along with me. We're goin' to see the sights before this thing's over."

Tony went to sleep; not so Johnny. He brought forth the photograph which he had found, and sat for half an hour studying it; trying to whip his mind into finding some likeness in it to some one he knew.

"That's all I got," he murmured. "It's got to tell me somethin'."

He placed the picture on the bed before him, and bent over it, his eyes screwed into a squint. Minutes slipped by unnoticed. Something vaguely reminiscent about the photograph began to torture him. Try as he would, he could not say what it was that was playing a sort of mental hide and go seek with him. At times he wondered if he were not the prey of his own desires. And yet, a little voice persisted within him. There was something here that stirred memories!

When it came to him, it came suddenly. His face went white.

"My God!" he whispered, clutching the picture. "The thing around that kid's neck is the locket Molly Kent wears!"

From staring at the picture he turned to the sleeping Tony. He even started to arouse him, but thought better of it.

"No," he said to himself. "I'll keep this secret. This is a clew!"

He tried to argue that the child in the picture bore some resemblance to Kent's daughter; but he could not convince himself.

"This picture might be a boy's, for all that," he muttered. "Looks somethin' like the dead man, too."

He gave up puzzling his brain over it, and kicking off his boots, made ready for bed. The locket in the picture and the one Molly wore were the same. That was enough. How she came by it, he'd try to learn to-morrow. Maybe old Jackson had bought it for her.

Jackson Kent! That started a new line of thought. Johnny became wide awake. Kent had fired him; the old man had seemed deaf to certain

facts; and now this locket of Molly's! A broad-side struck Johnny Dice.

"My God!" he exclaimed loud enough to wake up his pal. "Is that why he shut me up? Did Jackson Kent kill that man?"

CHAPTER VI.

OUTSIDE THE LAW.

JOHNNY DICE lay abed the following morning until half past seven o'clock, shamelessly reveling in his freedom from toil. At five Hobe and the others, Tony included, had trooped down to breakfast. Fifteen minutes later the Diamond-Bar boys had headed for the shipping pens to resume where they had left off the previous evening. Tony, helpless with nothing to do, waited with growing impatience for the appearance of the prodigal.

Specters of doubt, tantalizing ghosts of indecision troubled the sleeping Mr. Dice. His pugnacious face wore a frown. Every now and then his mouth would straighten and his jaw would shoot out to an alarming prominence. Maybe a dramatic gesture with his hand would follow. Johnny seemed continually to lose the decision in this silent fighting, for he would try it first on one side and then on the other.

Big Hobe had always found a bucketful of cold water a most excellent antidote for these symptoms; but Johnny was suffering from more than just too much sleep. He had closed his eyes convinced that he could put his hand on the guilty man. His deductions had been honest, sensible. Old man Kent was as guilty! Subconsciously, doubt had crept into his mind.

Jackson Kent had become such a meek, painfully righteous person these last few years that he seemed to lack the spinal stiffening a killer must possess. If he had been accused of taking nickels out of the collection box, one might have believed it of him; but murder? No! You'd have to have the reason for the crime, the whole, inside story of it before you could go out and expect men to believe you. Jackson Kent was a rich man, a figure of some importance in Shoshone County politics.

"Yes, we grant all that," whispered perverse little fiends in Johnny's ear, "but isn't it men like Kent who, free from popular suspicion, commit crimes of this sort? Wasn't his position in the county, his very respectability his best safeguard?"

Wild-eyed, Johnny sat up suddenly, his red head shaking doggedly. He looked about the room as if searching for the little devils that had romped through his sleep.

A grunt and an indulgent smile followed as he threw back the covers. "I'm sufferin' from that psychic stuff," he muttered. "Or is it food I need?"

His watch in his hands, he went to the door and called down to Vin: "Hey, Vin! Give me food or give me death! I'll be there *muy pronto, muchachito*."

Vinnie had a steaming breakfast on the table when Johnny entered the dining room. "By Chris', Johnny, you sleep lak' meel-li-on-aire. How you theenk I run theese bus'ness, breakfuss h'eight o'clock?"

"Aw, go on, you old dude!" Johnny laughed. "I'll be borrowin' money from you before I git through."

It was only talk on Johnny's part, but the Basque chose to take it seriously.

"That's all right wit' me, Johnny." Vin shook his head solemnly. "I don' refuse you, Johnny."

"Oh, how sweet those words, 'I will lend you,' " Johnny said airily. "But not yet you won't, *señor*. Little Johnny has plenty *dinero*. Is the old man gone?"

"*Si!* Hobe and heem go half past five. Leetle while ago the old man come back alone an' tak' the train for Winnemucca."

"Winnemucca?" Johnny Dice's eyebrows lifted. Was Kent running away?

Hobe entered then to square the Diamond-Bar debt with the hotel. The barroom was deserted, and the foreman, peeking into the dining room, saw Johnny and Vin. He came in and settled himself in a chair opposite the former.

"Go and figure up yore bill, Vinnie," he said to the Basque. When Vin had left, Hobe turned his inquisitive eyes to Johnny. "Last night was a terrible bust round here, wa'n't it?"

"It's all jake with me, Hobe. Don't you fret."

Ferris got up and walked back and forth a step or two, glum, his chin on his chest. "I reckon it ain't all right with me, though. I ain't exactly what you'd call a straw boss with this outfit—not

after all these years. If it wa'n't for the girl I'd ask for my time."

Hobe dropped back into his chair.

"Reckon I couldn't face her, though. She knows he's slippin'."

Johnny's knife and fork came down slowly, a peculiar dryness creeping into his throat as he thought of Molly Kent. He had forgotten her! Yet others, Hobe for instance, found time to think of her and consider her happiness.

And Johnny had been waiting only for Ferris to finish, to voice his suspicion of the old man.

The thought sent a shiver through him. Whatever old Kent had done, he was still Molly's father. Johnny shook his head as he asked himself if he could send her daddy down to Carson to be hanged. He'd damn himself for a meddling fool before he'd be a party to that. Molly Kent meant too much to the old Daimond-Bar hands. No wonder Hobe thought of her. Hadn't he taught her all the things a girl living on the range must know—riding, shooting, man-sense, and all the rest of it?

Why, hadn't he—Johnny Dice—broken her

first pony? Hadn't he even tried to persuade Hobe into letting him show her how to ride that little coffee cooler? And there had been parties, too, at the big house; a girl's pride in the day's work well done; implicit faith in the Diamond-Bar's ability to come through in a pinch.

Cold sweat stood on Johnny's brow as he asked himself if he could fail a girl like her. His voice was husky as he spoke to Ferris.

"Where's the old man?"

Hobe answered without looking up. "Gone to Winnemucca. Coming back to the ranch from there."

Nothing more was said for a minute or two. Vin called to Hobe, then, and Ferris pushed back his chair.

"Might as well pay up and go back to the cars," he said dolefully. "We'll be through, come noon."

Johnny got to his feet with the foreman.

"Listen, Hobe," he said, "did I make a fool of myself last night, lightin' into the old man thataway?"

Hobe rubbed his nose thoughtfully. "N-o-o-o,"

he drawled. "One was bad as the other. He surprised me. He'd been havin' such a good time with Doc all evenin'."

"Huh? Doin' what?"

Johnny's face was white with an emotion that Ferris was at a loss to understand.

"Playin' pinochle. I went outside to sit down after supper. The old man came out with me, and went across to Doc's place. I sat out in front till the freight pulled up. Rain drove me in. Doc and him was still at it. I could see 'em through the window. I could tell he was winnin'."

Johnny heaved a sigh of relief. That his solution of last night's murder was knocked flat caused no rancor in his heart. Thank God, he had not given voice to his thoughts. Gallup would have laughed him out of town.

Ferris, far shrewder than he looked, had caught the signs of the anxiety which possessed Johnny. "Say, Johnny," he inquired, "just what is it that y'u ain't sayin'?"

Johnny winced at this directness, but he answered with a question seemingly irrelevant to it.

"Did you touch that dead man last night, Hobe?"

Ferris cocked his head. "Of course," he said.

"Wasn't the body warm?"

"Sure was. The man hadn't been dead over thirty minutes."

"That's the way I figured it."

If the man had been dead only half an hour and Hobe had been watching the old man during that very time, then to a certainty Jackson Kent had had no hand in the killing.

Still there was something unsaid between them. Ferris felt it. He put his hand on Johnny's shoulder as they started for the door. Johnny stopped in his tracks. A flash of his eyes and the big man had his answer.

"Johnny!" he gasped. "No! My God, no! The old man didn't do that!"

"Did I say so?" Johnny demanded vehemently.

"No. But y'u were thinkin' it. Up in the room last night it was my idea, too. I wondered if y'd suspect him."

Johnny could afford to be belligerent now.

"You bet I did. I suspect every man in this

town until I prove to myself that he's innocent. That it wasn't him, is all right with me. I couldn't have gone after Molly Kent's dad. There ain't no one else in this town with any strings on him as far as I'm concerned. I'll git the man."

Hobe knew this was not mere talk.

"What are y'u goin' to do now?"

"Git busy! Like as not I'll drift out to the ranch some time to-day and git my stuff. My address is where I hang my hat until I've put this puzzle together."

Calling the waiting Tony, the two men went down the street.

"You forget anythin' I said last night, Tony," Johnny advised the Basque. "It's out—complete. Git that!"

The direction in which they were going made Tony ask their destination.

"I'm goin' to have a talk with Brackett. Let me do the palaverin'."

The liveryman had not yet seen the corpse, so Johnny's statement that the big stallion belonged to the dead man was a surprise to Brackett.

"Do you mind, Ed, if I have a look at the horse?" Johnny asked.

"No harm in that," Brackett answered. "Nobody know his name, you say?"

"Total stranger, Ed. There might be some mark or somethin' on his stuff."

This brief minute of importance appealed to Ed, and the three men began searching for some mark of identification. The missing saddlebag escaped Brackett's attention.

The search was a barren one, bed-roll, saddle and slicker being without any tell-tale mark. The stallion's brand, a circle-dagger, had been over-burned years ago.

"Didn't he have nothin' up to the hotel with him?" Ed asked. "Man would have an extra shirt and socks."

"Wasn't a thing up there, Ed," Johnny said truthfully. "Guess we can give up lookin' here."

When they had left the stable Johnny asked the Basque:

"Did you git what I found?"

"No. Me, I get not'ing."

Johnny smiled.

"The silver buttons on the bridle," he explained. "Both of them marked alike—C. T. I never heard of no brand like that. It's his initials. That's somethin' else to keep under your hat. That's a real clew."

"How you know, pleece, those t'ing ees clew?"

"Know? You don't have to know. A clew is just a clew. All we've got to do is to keep on gittin' them. We're goin' to saddle up and fan it out to the ranch and git our stuff. I'm through lookin' for evidence round here. If you saw that man on the North Fork three days ago, I just about know the way he took into town. He must have got on the North Fork from the west. If he did, he came through Winnemucca. Ain't no other way he could have got out of the hills. I'm goin' down to old Winnemuc and prospect around."

"*Cuidado!*" Tony whispered. "Here comes Gallup."

They were almost in front of Aaron's house before they came abreast of him. The coroner's eyes were snapping. Even his mustache seemed

to stand at attention, bristling as it were with anger.

“Well, I suppose you little boys have been havin’ your fun this mornin’.” He snickered contemptuously. “You take a word of advice from me, Johnny Dice—a fool and his money soon depart!”

“Say, Aaron, that’s not bad. Not bad at all, but you paste this in your hat, and let it stick to your rickety old slats—I go, oh, yes, but only to return. In other words, I’ll be back! And somebody’s goin’ to burn the *frijoles* when I do.” Johnny’s voice became velvety as he added: “And there ain’t no one in this little old town makin’ me go, either, *señor*.”

“No?” Gallup inquired with sarcastic politeness. “Don’t you be too sure about that.”

Tony motioned to Johnny to come along, but the boy pushed him aside. “Suppose you enlighten me on that last remark,” he said to Gallup.

Aaron did not dodge the issue. “With pleasure! You git out of town by noon or there’ll be a warrant out for your arrest for disturbin’ the

peace. You can't make a fool out of me and git away with it."

Tony's jaw set at the word arrest. Johnny met the threat with a smile, but he did not take Gallup's words as easily as he appeared to take them.

"You can't shut me up any other way," he explained for the coroner's benefit, "so you're goin' to have Roddy throw me in jail, eh? You politicians certainly stick together, don't you? I'd like to see that scarecrow sheriff go up against a real man."

"If you flatter yourself that you're one, you hang around."

It was on Johnny's tongue to make a fitting retort, to dare Gallup to bring up his reserves, but wisdom of a sort checked the hot words. He had set himself to do a certain thing. Shooting it out with Jasper Roddy would not accomplish it.

Tony's eyes were smiling now—a smile as guileful as his race was old. That Basque smile under fire is one of the little ways by which the children of the far Pyrenees announce that they are not Mexican. That smile is something to consider if

you are involved personally. Johnny caught it and understood.

Gallup was waiting for an answer. Johnny found one of little truth, but it caught old Aaron.

“Other business, my dear Mr. Gallup, forbids my doin’ battle with you and yours to-day. But some other day, dear sir!” Johnny’s tone was too extravagantly polite. “That little gun-play last evenin’ still absorbs my attention, Aaron. I could almost tell you who killed that man.”

The seriousness with which Johnny stated this fooled even Tony.

Gallup’s eyes wavered ever so little as Johnny stared into them. “Let’s hear his name,” Aaron demanded uneasily.

“You ask that—you of all men?” Johnny exclaimed, piling on the coals now that he had Aaron on edge.

“Why shouldn’t I ask?” the coroner almost roared. “Are you hintin’ at somethin’?”

Thus did Aaron deliver himself temporarily into Johnny’s hands.

“Why, ain’t you the party what proclaimed long

and loud last night that that dead man killed hisself?"

Gallup swallowed hard.

"That's all, huh?" he cried angrily. "Sounded to me like you was puttin' me under suspicion."

"Ain't I?" demanded Johnny. "I aim to, if I haven't. I suspect every man in this town to-day. And in your case, I couldn't begin to tell you all that I suspect about you."

"Mouth talk—sluff, that's all anybody can git from you!" Gallup shook his fist in Johnny's face. "When I talk, I say somethin'."

"Yeh, your tongue's all right, Aaron, but your brain is dead. You go down to Brackett's place and find out a thing or two. That dead man's horse and outfit is down there."

Tony's smile melted to one of almost positive enjoyment as he saw Gallup's dismay. This bit of information thoroughly upset Aaron. Truly, this Dice person had put one over on him!

"You meddlin' insect!" Gallup screeched as he stamped away. "You've got two hours to git out of town. You'll find I know eighteen or twenty little ways to shut you up!"

Johnny sped him on his way with a laugh that curdled the old man's soul.

At the corner, Johnny stopped to gaze at Aaron's retreating figure, now a block away. Turning into the crossroad, they waited until Gallup entered Brackett's barn.

"Come on, Tony," Johnny urged. "I've got a strange desire to see the inside of Mr. Gallup's house. You stay in front. I'm goin' through the window. Move up and down. Whistle if he comes back."

Johnny did not wait for the Basque to caution him. The window was open, and without any effort Johnny hoisted himself over the sill. Five minutes later he was back, and with Tony, started for the Palace.

Once in their room, Johnny pulled out the dead man's gun. "We're outside the law now, all right," he muttered. "But we got the reason for goin' to Winnemuc!"

"Those gun?"

"Sure, those gun," Johnny laughed. "That's a brand new firin' pin in that pistol. I'm going to find out who put it there. They ain't no gunsmith

this side of Winnemucca. Roll your stuff and we'll drift."

Five minutes later they were ready.

"Mebbe you suppose Gallup fin' those bridle buttons?" Tony asked as they started down the stairs.

"Not a chance, *muchachito*." Johnny patted his pants pocket. "I don't leave nothin' behind."

CHAPTER VII.

IF THIS BE LOVE.

SHORTLY after five o'clock that same day, Johnny and Tony emerged from the lava beds to the east of the Diamond-Bar stronghold. Below them, its fringe of poplars glistening in the sunlight, stood the comfortable old house and its outbuildings.

The trail from town led across miles of uninteresting flats, alkali patches and finally by means of much tortuous winding through the lava beds. A haze, as of smoke, hung in the sky. The air was warm. At midday it had been hot in the open. Sage hen and mountain quail rose before them, the old cocks and hens so heavy that the frantic flapping of their wings as they got into the air made the horses throw up their heads every time they flushed a covey.

Sleeping in a saddle is a little trick the range-man soon acquires. Many times on this same

trail Johnny and the Basque had ridden with closed eyes, their minds in dreamland. Not so today! And wherever men toiled north of the Humboldt this exception held true. This day was one of the awaited ones—one of those few, brief days of Indian summer when the desert smiles and relents. Perhaps because the time is so short, God pours the wine of life with a lavish hand. Mexican *peon*, Basque *pellado*, argonaut, prospector, cowman, herder—not one but answers to the spell of this magic which the red gods long ago gave to the tribes.

And yet this marvelous day found a peculiar sadness in Johnny's heart. Restless, untalkative, he had ridden the long miles, little understanding the misery which was in him. The sight of the old Diamond-Bar house seemed to furnish him with an answer, for he squinted his eyes to blot out some sudden emotion. Was he homesick? Was it the knowledge that he would not be riding this trail again that was setting so heavily upon him?

Johnny need not have wondered longer. He had discovered the truth. And this day of days had only accentuated his unhappiness.

This was *his* country. He knew every mesa, draw and coulee as a city boy knows his own block. Far horizons, towering peaks—they were landmarks to him; things of life, with personalities. There were things here that he loved because they were beautiful—colors unequaled, vistas beyond comparison.

To say that he ever referred to it in these or similar terms would be more than the truth. But he felt it; answered to the tug of it. And Johnny Dice was not an emotional person.

And yet men called his chosen land a desert. Passing strange it is that so ill a name suffices.

When they reached the house they found it seemingly as lazy as the day. Charlie Sam, the Chinese cook, lay sprawled upon a bench in the sun. He did not so much as move as Johnny rode past him. Little Hughie High, who combined the duties of ranch blacksmith, filer, and man of all work, had been tinkering with the windmill. He waved a careless hand from his perch above them, but made no word of greeting, fearing to break the undisturbed comfort which so rarely came his way.

A wide hall led through the ranch-house, in back of which stood the bunk-house. Beyond that, at some distance, were the barns and corrals. On the side of the house facing the men's quarters, with a door opening to the hallway, the old man had his office, a big square-shaped room.

On stated occasions, when it pleased old Jackson to unbend, he escorted whichever of his men he had invited into his sanctum, down that long, wide hall to the front door. Only at such times did the Diamond-Bar hands tread those precincts.

Tony went on to the bunk-house, but Johnny stopped and whistled a call. It went unanswered. His roving eyes searched the yard and windows, but Molly Kent was not to be seen. Walking around to the front of the house, Johnny peered through open doors. Tony had gone around to the rear of the place by now, and Johnny saw him as he stepped into the bunk-house.

Left alone with his thoughts, the boy stopped and listened. Only the penetrating sound of Charlie Sam's snoring broke the stillness. Cautiously, Johnny whistled again. His embarrassment grew as he waited. Minutes passed, and a

boldness he had never known in his days as a Diamond-Bar man took possession of him. Crossing the threshold he tapped on the door of Molly Kent's room.

Light as his tap had been the unlatched door moved back an inch or two. The delicate perfume which he had always associated with Molly reached his nostrils. Unknown to himself, he trembled.

She was not here; his good-bye would have to go unsaid. He extracted some slight degree of comfort from that. Good-byes did not come easily to his lips.

An overwhelming desire to push back that door and to stand for just one minute in the room which she had sanctified with her presence all these years took possession of him. There in her room he'd say his farewell to her.

From his pocket he brought forth a mysterious little package—a mouth organ. This was in answer to Molly's often expressed desire for one. Johnny had not spared his money in purchasing it. He had had it sent all the way from San Fran-

cisco. He looked at the package as if asking it to answer him.

"Yes," he murmured; "this 'll be best. I'll just leave it on her dresser for her. Maybe she'll guess it's from me."

The inside of that room was a revelation to Johnny Dice. Never before had he been face to face with feminine daintiness of this sort. From the chintz curtains and colorful cretonnes to the array of mysterious articles spread about him this room was as different from the rest of the house as day is from night.

Something sang in Johnny's heart as he reached out to place his gift on Molly's dresser and found himself gazing at his own picture in a neat little frame hung to one side of the girl's large mirror.

The picture was an old-fashioned studio photograph portraying the subject in one of his saddest and most miserable moments. Johnny's pride had long since forced him to destroy the copy he had kept for himself. But there it was in her room!

The world suddenly became a paradise. Even on Johnny the day had not been wasted. He smiled sheepishly on catching sight of his own re-

flection in the glass. He began to ask himself important questions. Between Molly and him there had never passed a word beyond the province of friendship. She was a rich man's daughter, and forty a month is no inducement to hold out to young ladies of her means. And then, too, it didn't lead to steady employment if one made eyes at owners' daughters. There were some social barriers even in Nevada.

Now, that he was leaving, matters matured very rapidly in the boy's mind. What sort of a fool had he been all these years not to have known that he was over his head, that Molly Kent meant more to him than any other being who had come into his life? An hour ago he had told himself he was blue because he was leaving the country and the Diamond-Bar behind. That was a lie! Own up to it, now. It wasn't the Diamond-Bar or the purple shadows on the Tuscaroras that he was going to miss. No! It was Molly Kent!

And Molly? Johnny's teeth clenched under his tightly pressed lips as he gazed once more on that picture of himself.

"She don't hate me, at least," he murmured

half aloud. "Who'd ever thought she'd 'a' kept that thing all these years? Why—and there's those little silver spurs I brung her when she was just a kid. Real silver, they was, too."

Johnny put his hand on them tenderly. He seemed to have difficulty in breathing. Emotion was welling up in him to a point which made him reel. The mouth organ was placed on the bureau. He wanted to get outside, to think, to tell himself that he had not been dreaming, that life still went on.

Was it because of Molly that the old man had been so short with him? The thought galloped through Johnny's mind. Did Jackson Kent see in him a possible suitor for her hand—an undesirable, financially irresponsible suitor? Had there been talk, whisperings behind his back? Had Molly said anything? A dozen questions leaped to his mind. He shook his head wearily as he turned for the door, anxious to be away from this house which only a few minutes before he had been loath to leave. Another step would have taken him to the door, when he stopped, mouth open, his eyes bulging as if they could not believe what

they beheld. Slowly the foot which he had poised in mid-air came down; but the accusing finger which he had pointed at the thing beside the door did not waver.

“Great God!” he groaned. “That’s a copy of the picture I’ve got in my pocket!”

It was, beyond question. Set in a small gold frame hung beside the door was an exact duplicate of the photograph he had found in the dead man’s wallet.

With cold fingers he held up the picture that he drew from his pocket until it rested beside the one on the wall. They were the same!

Eyes transfixed, Johnny stared on and on, and as he stood there spellbound, the door opened. Jackson Kent faced him. Something too big for words held the two for a brief second. Johnny was the first to react. Surreptitiously the hand holding the picture moved to his pocket, but he was too late. The old man had been staring at it.

Fingers of steel caught and held Johnny’s arm. The surprise had died out of Kent’s eyes. They were flashing now with a madman’s fury. The boy could feel the man’s hot breath upon his

cheek. Johnny heard the other's voice break as he fought for speech.

Then, with heaving lungs, old Jackson cried out:

"Give it to me! Give it to me—do you hear?" His voice arose until it became almost a scream as he demanded: "What are *you* doin' with *that* picture of my little girl?"

Kent's hungry fingers lunged for the coveted photograph. Johnny's eyes had narrowed to mere slits.

"No!" he exclaimed. "I keep that picture. It belongs to a dead man!"

CHAPTER VIII.

STRAIGHT TALK.

JOHNNY had immediate cause to regret his melodramatic words.

"Give me his name! Tell me who he was!" the old man shouted.

And obviously Johnny could not answer truthfully. He pondered lie after lie without finding one to pass muster. Kent saw his helplessness.

"You can't answer, eh? Well, maybe you can tell me what you're doin' here in this room."

"Tony and I came to git our stuff," Johnny replied.

"Your stuff? It ain't in here, is it?"

"I had a little present for Miss Molly. I wanted to leave it where she'd git it. I reckoned I'd not be seein' her again, soon."

"Present?" Old Jackson's lips curled contemptuously. "I'll bring all the presents she needs. You been treated most like one of the family

round here, so you show your gratitude by shinin' up to my girl, eh?"

"You know that ain't so," Johnny answered miserably. "Hobe and me has been bringin' her little things nigh ten years."

"She was a child then. And you carryin' her picture around. I won't have it! Damn it, I won't! My girl ain't intended for no forty-dollar-a-month cowpunch. I want that picture."

Johnny shook his head. Less angry than he had been, he said:

"I can't give it to you. If Molly says she wants it, all right. I'll give it to her. Ain't no talk goin' to make me change my mind about that."

"She'll tell you quick enough." Kent raised his voice to cry out her name.

"No good doin' that," Johnny advised. "She ain't here."

"I'll find out whether she is or not. You git your stuff now. Take your presents with you, too."

Johnny had never been dismissed in this fashion. Tight-lipped, cheeks burning, he shook his head. "No," he muttered, "I'd not do that."

“Well, I’ll take care of it, then.”

And he caught up the harmonica and hurled it through the open window. “You git your stuff,” he thundered.

The lust to tear this old man’s body with his hands surged in Johnny Dice. And yet, Molly was his daughter! The thought struck Johnny with a double significance. Jackson Kent had identified the dead man’s treasured keepsake. But why had that man carried Molly Kent’s photograph? Questions began stabbing at Johnny’s brain.

Molly had had nothing to do with the man’s death. Hobe had given the old man an alibi. But there was a draw to this affair which could not be argued into nothingness. Molly was mysteriously away from home; Jackson here when he had left for Winnemucca, and always that picture of the girl in the dead man’s wallet to be explained.

In a sort of daze Johnny got his blankets and other gear and placed them upon his saddle.

Kent had roused Charlie Sam and set him to

ringing the ranch-house bell. Only little Hughie answered the bell's imperative summons.

"Where's Molly?" the girl's father demanded.

"Now, that's a hard question to answer," Hughie replied. "Never a word did she say to me. She got her horse herself this mornin'. 'Twa'n't later than eight when she rode off. Charlie, here, must have talked to her."

"No talk," squint-eyed Charlie Sam declared. "Me pack lunch. She damn big hurry."

"One of you must have seen whicha-way she went."

"Left here headin' for Argenta," Hughie exclaimed. "I was over there last night for the mail. Brought a letter for her. Mayhap she's ridden out with the answer."

"She ain't been in Argenta," Kent said positively. "I—got off there myself, and borrowed a horse from Matt Pease. I'd 'a' passed her on the road if she'd been headin' there."

Argenta is a flag station half-way between Standing Rock and Winnemucca. The old man could easily enough have done as he claimed. But where could Molly have gone? If she had gone

south, she must have come to the railroad. Surely she would not have bothered with lunch had she set out for Argenta or any neighboring ranch.

Beyond question she had not gone to Standing Rock or else Johny and Tony would have passed her. That left only Winnemucca as a possible destination. Hughie's observation that she had been "all dressed up" only added to Johnny's conviction that he would find her there. But why had she left without leaving a note for her father? And why the long ride when she might have caught a train at Argenta or Standing Rock? Wasn't it plain that she hoped to go unquestioned? But what had she to conceal? Could the letter which Hughie had brought be the answer?

Johnny glanced at the old man, who was pacing back and forth, mumbling to himself. His concern for his girl swept away some of the boy's angry feelings. Old tyrant that he was, no one could deny his love for Molly.

"She shouldn't do these fool things," Johnny heard him say. "Runnin' off without a word! She's only a girl; only a child." He stopped to

catch Johnny's eye. "You come in here a minute," he ordered.

Tony sighed impatiently as Johnny and the old man went inside.

When the two men reached the office Kent shot his demand at the boy without a second's delay:

"I want that picture!"

"I told you I'd give it to Molly if she won't let me keep it. That's my answer. I never knew till an hour ago what she meant to me. I'm tellin' you fair, now, that I'm takin' my orders from her."

"Well, you're armed, and so is the Basque, but I'll have my say before very long. You stay 'way from my daughter. You're a fool if you're countin' on puttin' her between us. She's my girl! Keep your picture! She'll be askin' for it quick enough. Don't let me hear that you're showin' it round, makin' talk. By God, there won't be room enough in this State for you if you do."

"Your opinion of me does credit to you, don't it?" the boy snapped back. "Funny you didn't find me out long ago."

"You keep your back talk," Kent roared. "Where you goin' when you leave here?"

Johnny smiled enigmatically.

"That's a fair question. I'll ask you one, and we'll be even-Stephen. When you left Standing Rock this mornin' you told Hobe you were off for Winnemuc. I'd admire to know what made you change your mind."

"What do you mean?" gasped the old man. "My comin's and goin's are my own business. Are you hintin' at somethin'?"

"No, I ain't hintin'. But I'm doin' some tall thinkin'."

"You can give it a name if you're half a man."

Johnny turned away sadly.

"I guess I don't measure up," he said slowly. "And, besides, I'd hate to give tongue to it. But I'll say this much"—and he wheeled on old Kent again—"I'll answer your first question. I'm goin' and goin' when I leave here. And I'm goin' to keep on movin' till I find out who killed that man in Standing Rock. Till I do, my address is in my hat. I know you've got the low-down on me. Well, let it ride. No matter what you think, I

shoot square. You'rè rich, you've got big friends; I know what you can do to me. Hop to it! But don't you ever forgit that while I live I love your daughter. And if I ever amount to anythin', and she'll have me, I'll come back and marry her. And you can please go to hell!"

CHAPTER IX.

TWO OLD MEN.

THE following morning at eleven o'clock Johnny and Tony sent their tired ponies across the newfangled concrete bridge which spanned the Humboldt on upper Bridge Street.

Winnemucca lay somnolent in the midday sun, the street so deep with dust that it softened the sound of their horses' hoofs to a dull pad-pad as they continued on past Rinehart's general store and the new State Bank building. The two men had ridden all night. In fact, they had put a staggering number of miles behind them since they had left Standing Rock the preceding day.

Johnny swung off his horse in front of the Eldorado Hotel. He had long since decided that he would find Molly registered there. His method of ascertaining this was indeed strange, for, instead of going to the desk where the register lay open to public view, he made directly for the bar. Whitey Carr, the bartender, nodded to him.

Johnny said "How?" and ordered a drink. It was to win this bit of recognition that he had entered the room. He had been there often enough to have more than a nodding acquaintance with Whitey and his co-workers. In truth, Johnny's intimacy with the craft was well-nigh universal.

Being remembered, and thusly armed for his attack on the register, he searched for some written sign of the girl's presence. Her name did not reward him. Whitey Carr saw his perturbation and through the swinging doors he called:

"Who you looking for; Johnny?"

Johnny's desire to find the girl outweighed his desire for secrecy.

"Lookin' for the old man's daughter," he called back to Whitey.

The bartender shook his head positively.

"Ain't been no females here in two days," he said. "That is, exceptin' some show folks."

There was no need looking for her at the other hotels. If she were in town she would be here. Johnny's face wore a frown as he stepped to the door and motioned to Tony to come in and eat.

"She ain't here," he said to the Basque. "We got to eat, though. Soon as I get a few victuals inside of me I'll prospect around."

The restaurant was a long, narrow room set with high stools before a wooden counter. Tony tried to make talk, but the boy was more intent on watching the few passers-by on Bridge Street, hoping against hope that he might catch a glimpse of the girl. But he finished his meal of ham and eggs and pie without this coming to pass.

When he had paid their check he said to Tony:

"You'd better git a room and turn in for an hour or two. I'll be back soon. What we got to do won't be done in a day."

"For why you leave me behin', Johnny?"

"I ain't leavin' you behind. I tell you, we need sleep. We may be headin' back for Standing Rock to-night. You turn in."

Leaving the hotel, Johnny went down the street to Dan Secor's shop. Old Dan ran a second-hand store and pawnshop in addition to his business of gunsmithing. He was going home for dinner when Johnny hailed him.

"Hey, Dan," the boy called, "I want to see you a minute before you go. Open up for a second."

"That's you boys," the old fellow growled. "Sit here all mornin' long 'thout nary a customer, and soon as I gits locked up you flock in. What you want?"

"Dan, I want you to take a look at this gun. D'you ever see it before?"

Dan had to put his specs in position before he could answer.

"Sure; put that firin' pin in myself. That's an old Ross pistol."

Johnny was all smiles.

This was the first bit of luck to come his way this day.

"I reckoned you'd fixed it up."

"Ain't yore gun, is it?" old Dan questioned. "Leastways, it wa'n't you had it in here to be fixed."

"No. I just came by the gun accidental-like. I'm right interested in the man what owned it, though. Suppose you got his name in your books."

"Umph—umph!" Dan grunted. "Ain't, nei-

ther. I 'member he waited here while I put in the pin. Had quite a talk."

Johnny's face fell. Old Dan's words had dropped him from the clouds to the bottomless pit. What mattered it that he had traced the dead man's movements to Secor's shop? His surmising was proved correct, but the murdered man's identity remained a mystery, and that had to be solved before he could proceed with any assurance of success. Johnny cursed in his chagrin. Could you find two men in a hundred who would have a gun repaired while they waited? Of course not! It was just a trick of fate's to thwart him. It wouldn't happen so again in a thousand years.

"You seem right put out," Dan rejoined. "Man ain't done nothin'?"

"Not a thing. Say, you mind tellin' me what you two talked about?"

"Don't know as I do. Wa'n't nothin' puss'nal; 'twas mostly cattle talk, him askin' after the brands folks was runnin' along the river. You know, light talk—two old men."

The old gunsmith took off his glasses and gazed

vacantly into space, as if beholding some pleasant vista of almost forgotten years. "Yes," he murmured, "two old men. Him and me had been in Santa Fe 'bout the same time." Dan clucked his lips at the memory. "Them was the days; riotin' ever' night, hell poppin' over in the Tonto, Injuns puttin' on the paint every now and then."

The old man paused abruptly. Then:

"Say, Johnny!" he exclaimed. "Come to think on it, your man did say somethin' puss'nal. Asked me what folks said of old Kent's daughter."

"What?"

Johnny's exclamation was whipped out with such force as to startle old Dan. Here was that draw again—Molly and the dead man. Every place he turned he came face to face with it.

The gunsmith misunderstood the boy's attitude. "Why, Johnny, they wa'n't no harm in the question. I told him folks said only good things of Molly Kent. And he didn't seem to set no great store by my answer. Said he was goin' over to the Piute Reservation; didn't say he was, but I knew it because he asked me if he could git to Standing

Rock from the North Fork without a-comin' way back here."

Johnny began to understand that the talk the two men had was of vital importance, even though old Dan saw nothing of value in it. The boy wondered if he should tell the old man of the murder. Another day and he would know of it, anyhow. Better make an ally of the old man and get him to hold his tongue. And then, too, the surprise of telling him now might startle him into recalling some other bit of conversation.

"Dan," he began, "when did you have that talk?"

" 'Bout six days ago, I reckon."

"You ain't sure?"

"Le's see—yes, I'm sot on that. 'Twas the first of the month."

The first of the month; this was the sixth. Tony had seen the man on the North Fork five days ago. It fitted in!

"He didn't say who he was goin' to see over in the Injun country?"

"Don't reckon he did."

"That's goin' to be awfully important, Dan,

because this man got hisself killed night before last."

"No! Not killed?"

"Killed dead. Old Aaron says he killed hisself. It's a lie. He was murdered. I'm aimin' to find out who did it. And, Dan, when folks git to talkin' about it down here, I want you to be dumb. That man got a rotten deal. Ain't nobody but me goin' to square it. What do you say?"

"I say yes. You ain't askin' me nothin'." He shook his head. "Killed, eh? And him lookin' to be so handy with a gun. It wa'n't no fair fight."

"You said somethin'. I know he was on the North Fork. Went to the Rock from there. But there was two days in between. Do you suppose he was on the Reservation all that time? Can't you remember who he was goin' to see over there? Was it Ames, the trader, or the agent? Maybe it was old Thunder Bird!"

"No, Johnny, he didn't say. But he did tell me he was comin' back! Said he'd be here Saturday."

"Saturday? That's to-day." Johnny whistled a surprised note or two. Dan watched him as he walked back and forth, hands thrust deep into his

pockets. "Saturday," the boy muttered. "Comin' back here. Say, Dan, what would he be comin' back here for? Was he aimin' to meet somebody?"

"That might 'a' been it. Or mail—he might 'a' been expectin' a letter."

"That's it!" Johnny pounded the counter vehemently. "He was comin' back for his mail!"

Johnny was so excited that the noon-time pedestrians stared at him as they passed.

The boy was unmindful of them until a girl's mocking laugh reached his ears. He turned, then, to stare her down; but the expression on his face changed with magic swiftness, for, standing there watching him, her face pressed close to old Dan's window, was Molly Kent.

She had been watching him these many seconds. A roguish light swam in her eyes as Johnny's mouth sagged with amazement.

"Ride him, cowboy!" she called. "Ride him!"

It was the old Diamond-Bar battle-cry.

Johnny shook his head dully. "I'm damned!" was all he could say.

CHAPTER X.

MOLLY KENT.

SWEET Molly Kent was as a flower blooming in the grayness of wind-swept Winnemucca. Johnny wondered how she contrived to be so clean and pressed. He had been to San Francisco and seen the fashionable folk of Grant Avenue. Molly could have walked among them this day to their envy.

On the range she wore fitting clothes, but never—Heaven forbid!—the side-show “cow-girl” costume which Western girls are popularly supposed to wear. Brown tweeds of a sensible cut, and boots to match the best, served her. If she made any concession to the popular idea it was in the wearing of a small sombrero. Johnny had seen her so attired times enough to have overcome his awe of her. This new dress of to-day, however, was thoroughly disconcerting. Wise Molly divined his embarrassment and, womanlike, enjoyed it.

The flash of her gleaming white teeth only added to the boy's uneasiness. It was so much better to observe girls of her type from a distance. Not that she was merely pretty or in a true sense beautiful. Molly's chin was too masculine for that, her eyes too wide-set. And yet it was her eyes and that very chin which compelled attention. There was sense in this girl, a clean body and a clean mind. Loyalty spoke, too.

Others had noted these things. Men do. Yes, and most women, too. Springy step, well-rounded ankles, glorious body, the touch of color in the cheeks glowing against her black hair—they all spoke of youth, of rare vitality. Here was a human being come thus far from the Master's mold unmarred. And this in a rough country. It was no mean compliment to Jackson Kent.

Poor Johnny! He sensed these things and felt himself ugly, awkward, hopeless before her. At this moment he would have fought any man so rash as to claim that she could ever care for his unworthy self.

Taking pity on Johnny, Molly ended his misery by breaking the spell which held him.

"I thought you were going to strike that old man," she said half seriously. "I'd like to know what you are doing down here."

"Business," Johnny answered dryly.

"Well, the Diamond-Bar is shipping from Standing Rock, isn't it?"

Molly's eyes held his provokingly.

"It is," Johnny drawled nervously.

"But you're not. Is that what you are trying to say, Mr. Dice?"

Johnny nodded his head ever so slightly. The smile left Molly's eyes.

"Father and you again, Johnny?" she asked anxiously.

"Just me this time, I guess. No matter. I got my pay. But let's talk of somethin' pleasant, if there is any such."

The girl's gayety did not return so easily. "I just can't be pleasant by request, that way, Johnny," she said honestly. "I want to talk to you about this before I start for home."

"When you leavin' here?"

"Not before morning."

This suited Mr. Dice.

"You rode in, didn't yuh?" he questioned. Molly grinned in spite of herself. "Folks to home all worried about you," the boy went on. "Your daddy tearin' hair and cursin'. I figured you was down here, and I looked for you at the hotel."

"Don't you tell me what you thought when you found I wasn't there. Of course I wouldn't go to a hotel. The Langwell girls would never forgive me if I did. Don't tell me *you* were worried."

"That would be kinda hard for me, wouldn't it?" Johnny drawled.

Molly laughed outright at this. "Next to injured feelings, there's nothing like self-pity to make a person miserable, is there, Johnny? Now you tell me, is father out looking for me?"

"Certainly is. You'd better send a telegram over to Argenta. Hughie High will be down there to-night for the mail."

"Of course. I don't understand what brought father back from the Rock so quickly. Was it anything to do with you?"

And now Johnny lied. "I'd hate to think so," he told her.

Shrewd Molly was not more than half convinced of this.

"And the business that brought you here?" she inquired.

Apparently, a violent itching of the Dice scalp followed, but the girl insisted upon an answer.

"Er—private business," Johnny said lamely; but to Molly it carried an air of mystery.

"Well, you meet me at the hotel about two. I wish father had stayed at the Rock another day."

Johnny turned back to Dan's place, but the old man had slipped out. So, left to himself, the boy promptly began to worry over Molly's farewell words. It was plain enough that she had hoped to make her hurried trip without her father knowing of it. But what reason could she have for that? The question stayed with Mr. Dice. The girl was nervous. He could tell that. Coming to Winnemucca had always been something of a lark. Well, he had failed to find any spirit of vacation about her to-day. A blunt question or two would follow this afternoon!

Johnny had voiced his need of sleep, but now that he had the opportunity he made no effort to

resign himself to it. For one thing, he wanted to think over that trip to the reservation. Western men did not go romping over the hills to Indian country for the thrill of going. It had been one of the dead man's last acts; perhaps the one which had led to his death.

The boy could advance a dozen reasons for the man's going there. Instinctively he felt it held the answer to the riddle he was trying to solve. Another talk with Dan was urgent, and then a visit to the Agency. Johnny could talk the Piute hand language. If necessary he would stay there for days until he had talked to every brave on the reservation.

But that was something for this afternoon or to-morrow. For the immediate present he had a matter of equal importance in mind. Perhaps nothing would come of it, but it was surely worth the effort. Johnny was as certain now as he had been when Molly had interrupted him in his talk with Dan that the stranger had been coming back to Winnemucca for his mail. It was the boy's intention to verify this at once.

CHAPTER XI.

MORE THAN A BET.

NOONTIME was an hour of leisure at the post office, due to the fact that without exception the east and west mail trains arrived in the very early morning or late afternoon. This suited Johnny. Strolling up to the window he found Miss Nannie Price, the assistant postmistress, in the act of artistically dissecting an orange.

"Mr. Allerdyce!" Nannie gurgled. "You *are* a stranger, even though handsomer than usual."

"Now, you stop, Miss Nannie, ma'am," Johnny grinned. "A new neckpiece ain't deceivin' you thata-way."

Nannie laughed. In common with many others, she was fond of Johnny.

"You're not expecting any mail?" she asked.

"No, ma'am, not exactly. Fact is, Miss Nannie, I want you to do me a favor. And it ain't downright reg'lar, either."

Nannie perked up at once. "Oh, Mr. Aller-

dyce," she cooed, "I'm dying to know what it is."

"Well, I'll tell yuh. There was a man over in Standing Rock the other night, and nobody could find out his name. I just bet I could. I know he was allowin' to come back here, and I surmise he gets mail here. His initials are C. T. I told myself if anybody answered to that down here, you'd know it."

"C. T.?" queried Nannie, her memory being put to question. "C. T.—Charles, Chris, Chester, Cleve—Cleve von Thurlow? No, that would be C. V., wouldn't it? Humph! Beats me." And to show how positive her statement was she reached for the letters in the T pigeonhole. Thumbing them with a practiced hand she ran over them speedily. Johnny's heart was pounding heavily, for he was having the secrets of the United States mails opened to him. Putting Nannie on her mettle had won where a more direct method would have failed most miserably.

Johnny's elation began to wane as the girl went on through the handful of letters without pausing, and then, as he was about to give up hope, Nannie flapped a letter to the counter.

"That's him!" she exclaimed. "Crosbie Traynor! Must be, because here's another for him. Where was he from—Flagstaff?"

"That's right," Johnny assured her. "From down Arizona way. Crosbie Traynor! Well, ma'am, it's sure my treat. Next time you go by the Eagle Drug, you stop in. There'll be a box of candy there for you."

"You shouldn't do that, Mr. Allerdyce," Nannie protested very prettily. "You know that I usually do remember names; but we've been so busy."

Johnny was in no mood to complain of this willing worker. "My laws, of course!" he hastened to say. "Fools shouldn't be coming around botherin' you."

And Johnny, further to show his gratitude, purchased a dollar's worth of stamps, for which he had absolutely no use. And, of course, Nannie's percentage didn't hold good on the deal, either.

Johnny's pace, when he had turned back on to Bridge Street, slowed materially. He was too full for words. To go back to the hotel would be to share his success with Tony, and he was not yet

ready to do that. As was habitual with him, he wanted to be alone to digest this latest discovery. He found the proper place for it in the deserted waiting-room at the Espee station.

His continual repetition of the dead man's name might have been a funeral chant, so often did he sound it.

"Crosbie Traynor." A pause, then: "Crosbie Traynor. I've got the tracks cleared now! I'll see the Injuns first; but if I'm stopped there, I'm goin' on, even if it's clear to Flagstaff!"

CHAPTER XII.

MOLLY EXPLAINS.

Two o'clock found Johnny mounting the stairs to the Eldorado's parlor. Molly awaited him, but the boy found her cast down. Her appearance prompted him to plain speaking.

"Listen, girl," he said. "There's somethin' wrong. Now, tell me what it is. I felt it this mornin'. It ain't your way to steal off, and that's what you did this trip. You're worried, and I know it."

"I am, Johnny," Molly answered readily. "I'd have told you without your asking. I did come here hurriedly and without a word to any one. Maybe I've been foolish, but it sounded so genuine that I had to do as I have. I won't talk in riddles any longer. Hughie brought me this letter night before last. It rather upset me, and then, too, I was curious. I want you to read it."

Johnny's face whitened as he obeyed her, for

without question it was a communication from Crosbie Traynor.

The letter ran:

"MISS MOLLY KENT, Diamond-Bar Ranch:

"Please do not be alarmed by this letter. One who wishes you well writes it. Although I am a stranger, I have traveled many hundred miles to see you.

"I am an old man—old beyond my time. Seeing you is one of the two ambitions I have left me. Let the fact that I have loved your mother, living and dead, these forty years, explain my interest in you. It is of her that I want to talk to you.

"Will you come to Winnemucca on the sixth? I'll look for you in the parlor of the Eldorado Hotel at noon.

"For reasons that you will understand then, I hope you will come alone and that you will not go to the shipping pens until you have seen me.

"My name would mean nothing to you, so I will sign myself just

"YOUR FRIEND."

A sigh escaped Johnny as he handed back the letter.

"Well, what do you make of it?" Molly asked earnestly.

The boy could only shake his head. Here was the final proof of the dead man's interest in the girl Johnny loved. What lay in back of it was still a closed book, but certainly Traynor had felt himself close to her.

His death may have been without connection with his proposed intention to see Molly, but Johnny just could not believe it.

There was old Kent's attitude toward Johnny; the whole sorry business at Standing Rock; the bickering; the stupidity of men who were solid citizens.

Was it all a play, a staged show to block justice?

The boy tried to close his eyes to the pictures his sorely puzzled brain conjectured, but in spite of every resolve an inner voice kept on dinning in his ears: "Jackson Kent killed this man! Hired it done! Paid for it!"

But why? Molly's mother? What other reason could a rich man have for ordering a crime of this sort?

It was not to be supposed that Johnny's excitement would escape Molly's eyes. In comparison she was less nervous than he.

"Are you reading something between the lines?" she demanded. "Your face is white."

"Miss Molly, how long have you been waiting?"

"On and off since eleven. But tell me, shouldn't I have come? Don't be mysterious that way, Johnny. You actually frighten me."

"No harm in coming," he told her. He was only marking time. Johnny knew that he would have to tell some part of what had happened to the man who had written her this letter. "Can you make a guess as to who wrote that note?" he went on, still playing against the minutes.

"Why, no. I haven't the slightest memory of my mother. And I do believe the man was what he claimed to be."

"He was," Johnny answered succinctly. "What you intendin' doin' now?"

"I thought I'd wait here the rest of the afternoon."

Now he had to tell her.

"No use doin' that, little girl. No use at all."

Johnny's manner brought the girl to her feet.

"What *are* you saying?" she asked falteringly.

"He won't come." The words left the boy's lips slowly. "The man you're waiting for is dead!"

CHAPTER XIII.

“HE IS MY FRIEND!”

CALL it intuition, a sixth sense, or what you will, a feeling of loss which she could not explain gripped Molly Kent. That Crosbie Traynor was dead was tragic; that he had been killed was even more of a shock, but it did not account for the grief which choked her.

Johnny told himself he had never been more witless. Why had he been so abrupt? For the first time in his life he saw tears in Molly Kent's eyes, and questions which he would have to answer. But even though he knew that she would have the facts from him, he still sought to withhold them. This, of course, because he saw no way of telling the complete truth without putting the girl's father under suspicion.

In twenty minutes Johnny managed to become so involved that a child would have known that he was telling less than half of what he knew.

It definitely added to Molly's misery. Also, it awakened in her a sense of shrewdness which left Johnny helpless.

“Just what did all this have to do with your leaving the Diamond-Bar?” she asked flatly.

Johnny stumbled over his answer. “Why—er—nothin’,” he drawled.

Molly nodded her head sagaciously. She was not fooled.

“I knew it,” she said decisively. “You’ve been telling me only half the truth. You were too painfully careful not to mention father’s name. Your quarrel had something to do with Mr. Traynor’s death.”

Johnny hung his head, afraid to meet her eyes, or else he would have seen the girl’s face pale.

“Tell me, Johnny,” she said with a queer little quaver in her voice, “is father in trouble?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Well, go on,” she prompted.

The boy sighed heavily, continuing to look away.

“I didn’t want to say nothin’ ’bout our run-in,” said he. “Now you’re thinkin’ all sorts of things,

and I got to tell you. Old Aaron's a fool, and he tried to shut me up. Couldn't do it, though. Then the boss came in and sided with him. That riled me, seein' as how the man couldn't have killed hisself. I made some talk about findin' out who did the killin', and I was told pretty plain that I could either punch cattle or quit, that the Diamond-Bar wasn't payin' wages to have me goin' around snoopin' into what didn't concern me none."

"I can just hear father saying that," Molly declared. "You've got to forgive him, Johnny. He's so old; and he worries so lately. He helped to elect Mr. Gallup. Naturally he couldn't go back on him. Honestly, you had me worried. I just couldn't imagine what had happened. Don't look so glum. I'll see that father asks you to come back."

Johnny raised his head at that.

"No," he said positively. "I wouldn't do that. A girl couldn't understand it, I guess; but I'll never ride for Diamond-Bar again."

"Because of a few hot words?" Molly stopped abruptly, her eyes holding Johnny's. "Or else—"

A shiver cascaded down the boy's spine as he waited for her to finish, “or else you think that he cut you short because he had something to do with Mr. Traynor's death. Is that what you think?”

Johnny's face worked convulsively as he strove for an honest answer.

“I don't know what I think,” he said at last. “Whenever I lie to you it's because I want to save you from somethin' I know'd hurt you. I'd steal for you, Molly Kent; I'd lie and do 'most anythin', but when you ask me a straight question like that, I've got to shoot square. I tell you I don't know what I think!”

“Oh, Johnny, Johnny! You can't mean that! You don't think that my father could have killed that man? Why, he's been the salt of the earth to me. No one has ever had to complain of him. You know what the last two winters have been, and the price of steers 'way down. It's been two years of loss for him, and he's too old to take it with a grin. He has been short with Hobe, but Hobe overlooks it. He understands. But you, Johnny—you suspect him—and of this.

Aw-w-w!" A sob broke from her lips. "And I had such faith in you, Johnny," she muttered distractedly. "Do you want to break my heart?"

"Oh, please, Molly, don't—don't let it matter," pleaded Johnny, the misery in his soul causing his voice to quaver. "What difference does it make what I think?"

"I'll be as honest as you," Molly answered with a straightening of her lips. "It means my happiness. Do you think I could let you go away carrying that thought? You are no fool, Johnny Dice. Something more definite than anything you've told me planted that ugly thought in your mind. I want to know what it was. Don't say you can't tell me. Whatever you say won't shake my faith in my father. Jackson Kent's name is respected from one side of this State to the other. It's not to defend him that I implore you to speak. I want you set right. This letter proves nothing. Mr. Traynor may have had many enemies. That he wanted to see me to satisfy an old man's whim was undoubtedly just the merest coincidence. That in itself could not put my father under suspicion. Could it?"

"I ain't said that," the unhappy Johnny replied. "It's just my foolishness."

Glancing at Molly, he saw that she was re-reading the letter.

"Tell me," she demanded, "why did he ask me to keep away from the shipping pens? I'd have no reason for going there."

"I thought about that, too. It's beyond me. All I know is that he was coming back here to-day. Dan Secor told me that. He'd fixed a gun for Traynor. Said he'd be back on the sixth."

"The sixth—the sixth of October!"

The letter fluttered to the floor from the girl's fingers as, white of face, she sprang to her feet.

"Johnny!" she cried. "Oh, dear God! Don't you see it—don't you understand? The Diamond-Bar has begun shipping from Winnemucca on the sixth of October for three years. That is why he didn't want me to go to the pens. He thought father would be there."

In a flash Johnny caught Traynor's idea. If, as the boy had every reason to suspect, old Kent was the man Traynor had come to square accounts with, then he had the answer to the man's every

movement for a week before his death. That is, of course, excepting those two mysterious days on the Reservation. This coming back to Winnemucca was for three purposes: to see the girl, to settle with Kent, and, obviously, to replenish his funds, inasmuch as the letters from Flagstaff were from a Flagstaff bank.

Traynor had told Vinnie, the Basque, that he would not stay the night in Standing Rock. His one idea was to get back to Winnemucca by the sixth. Going on this thought, Johnny saw that the man's presence in Standing Rock had been but incidental to his return here. But he had been seen. Kent must have kept out of his way, and after, or during supper, had slipped up to Traynor's room and shot him.

Wasn't there sense in every line of this reasoning? Didn't all of the dozen and one little incidents since the crime confirm the facts?

Johnny wondered if he would find out anything in Elk Valley among the Indians, to make him change his mind. The evidence he held was circumstantial. Sometimes it lies. No matter. There was nothing left for him to do but to go through

with this hunt, make the trip to Elk Valley and keep his own counsel. In no other way could he serve Molly better.

He had bungled things or else he would have avoided this scene with her. Her excitement and nervousness were due to him.

He detested himself for having alarmed her. Instead of the pleasant half hour he had looked forward to, he had frightened and hurt her. The thing to do now was to still any rising suspicion she might have and get her started for home. So he made small of Molly's deductions.

"Traynor may have been a friend of your father's," he said to her. "Or again just another coincidence. As you rightly said, things like that don't prove a thing. Wasn't nothin' else planted a doubt in my mind, and I see how downright senseless it was now."

"Are you being honest with me, Johnny?"

"Of course. Why don't you take the night train to Argenta? Matt will see that you git home. Won't be no trouble sendin' your horse out to the ranch."

"I guess that would be the best thing to do. But you, Johnny, what are you going to do?"

"Goin' over to the Injun country to-morrow."

"Elk Valley? What strange business is taking you there?"

"Crosbie Traynor. I aim to find out who killed him. He was on the Reservation two days just before he came into the Rock. I reckon I'll find out who had it in for him over there. I owe it to you to clear up this thing."

"I wish I could go with you, but of course I can't. Will you go in by the way of the ranch? It's not much farther than by way of the North Fork."

It was on Johnny's tongue to say: "Of course, if you want me to," but hadn't old Jackson Kent warned him off? Rebellion began to surge in Johnny's soul. Kent confronted him at every turn. And this would continue to happen. It began to dawn upon the boy that things indeed were at a pretty pass. It was squarely up to him to decide those little questions of conduct by which he would either win or lose Molly Kent. She was the stake.

Johnny knew that the old man would use any

end to turn the girl against him. So, naturally, he asked himself what he had to gain by walking wide of the old cattleman. To defy her father might turn the girl against him. Johnny wondered. Surely Molly would like him less if he turned tail and ran. Yes, that was the correct answer, provided he considered himself as only an undesirable suitor. But just how much did that enter into the break between them?

To be frank, didn't Jackson Kent see in him his accuser, the man whom he feared? Therefore, Traynor's death had to be explained before he could hope for fair play from Kent. And Johnny was too pessimistic to believe that when solution of the murder had been achieved it would prove anything other than the old man's guilt. Knowledge of that sort would not heal the breach. They would go to their death bitter enemies.

Knowing Molly for the girl she was Johnny realized that she would never go back on her father. The boy's teeth sank into his lips. He saw now just how hopeless his dreams were. There was a barrier between Molly and him which could never be removed.

His head snapped back at the thought. Well, if it was written that he had to lose her, he at least would go down fighting. To hell with Jackson Kent! He was her father, but he was also a man. They were two men facing each other, fighting for her love. Kent was old, but his money and his power made it a fair fight. Let it ride!

Molly little guessed the thoughts racing through Johnny's mind or understood the tenseness of his voice as he answered her.

"Why," he said slowly, "I'll stop at the Diamond-Bar if you want me to."

"No, you won't!" came a startling interruption; "the last word I said to you was 'git!' Keep off the Diamond-Bar! I might 'a' known I'd find you here fillin' my girl's head with your schemes and nonsense. I told you before to git, and I tell it to you now! Go!"

Kent's wrinkled face was crimson as he thundered on, and Molly's knees shook at his sudden appearance. Johnny's eyes narrowed angrily at the old man. How long he had been there in the doorway the boy did not know. He must have crept up the stairs.

Beseechingly, Molly held out her arms to her father.

"Please, *father*," she entreated, "don't make a scene! Are you mad? You didn't have to steal upon us in this fashion. Whatever difference of opinion there is between you two, it doesn't call for this sort of conduct."

"So even you turn against me, eh? He's poisoned your mind against me!"

"Stop! You don't know what you are saying."

"I do! He's a treacherous leopard, the——"

Molly's cheeks were the color of chalk. With clenched fists held to her breasts she threw back her head and hurled her defiance at the old man.

"No!" she cried, her head thrown back. "No one, father, not even you, can speak like that to me. Johnny Dice is my friend! I'd trust him with my life!"

CHAPTER XIV.

FOR THE HEART OF A GIRL.

SOMETHING sang in the heart of Johnny Dice. The one being in the world who mattered had faith in him. The impulse to take her into his arms at this moment almost overcame him. He had seen Molly Kent under varied circumstances, but never so superb as now. She was all woman; mature where Johnny had believed her mere girl. The sight of her so aroused, so alive, thrilled him in a manner quite new.

Whatever had gone before was as nothing now. Life began here. Down through the years his memories of Molly Kent would date from this moment, so utterly did his spirit bend to worship her.

It had needed a moment as dramatic as this to awaken the boy to the enormity of his loss should he lose her.

And, although he was enraged, Jackson Kent's

eyes had been opened, too. He saw the abyss yawning at his feet, and an abyss it was, indeed—the losing of his girl! Death was trivial beside it. Old age was upon him and it frightened Jackson Kent to the very marrow to consider the future, robbed of Molly's great love. And it would get to that if this man came between them.

In his day Kent had held himself a hard man, cold, unemotional; asking affection of none. But, as so often happens with men of his type, he gave when he least suspected it, and now that the tide had set the other way he knew his need. Often he had fooled himself into worshiping his money. His false god mocked him.

His hungry heart needed Molly, not money! And he swore that he would have her; that Johnny Dice should never see her again. Had the fool bewitched the girl? Wait until she heard how he had been caught skulking in her room. Yes, and his insolence at the Rock; she'd resent that. There was good steel in Molly. This Dice person would find that the Kents stuck together!

And, oh, how he hated Johnny! Anger surged through his brain in blinding waves until his

withered old body trembled. Had he been at all apoplectic, Jackson Kent would have been stricken dead.

Poor Molly winced as she regarded him. She had insisted on fair play, but without intending to wound her father. What had got into folks lately to make them fly at each others' throats in this fashion? Thoroughly distressed, she said:

"Father, I'm sorry I hurt you. I didn't mean to be impertinent."

The old man unbent readily enough.

"No matter," he said, opening his arms to her. "I'm not angry with you. This man here is the person I've got my quarrel with. You look tired, nervous. I'll get you a room and you go and lie down for a spell. When you're rested up we'll go home. Anythin' we've got to say to each other we can say when we're alone."

"Maybe that is best; but while the three of us are here, father, I want to ask you one question. Did you know Crosbie Traynor?"

The suddenness of the question startled Johnny. He thought he saw the old man sway and struggle for breath even as his head shook his denial

of any knowledge of the dead man. The next instant there was a grim smile on Kent's lips. It made Johnny, who knew not the cost of it, open his eyes still wider.

"Traynor?" Kent questioned. "Crosbie Traynor? No, I never heard of him. Is he a friend of this man?"

The question was ingenious. Johnny recovered his tongue in time to answer for himself.

"I don't know anythin' about him to make me ashamed to call him friend."

"Your standard ain't high," snapped the old man. "A person who'll go snoopin' round a girl's bedroom ain't likely to pick his friends carefully."

The inference was too thinly veiled to escape Molly.

"Explain yourself, father. What do you mean?"

"You bet I'll explain. He knows what I mean. I figured he wouldn't be sayin' anythin' about that to you. I caught him red-handed, I tell you. Snoopin' in your room, where no man has ever set his foot—not even me. Wa'n't anybody to

home but the Chink and Hughie. Just the chance he was lookin' for. Am I lyin'?" he demanded of Johnny.

The boy's cheeks were scarlet! Molly was staring at him amazedly. With a clicking of syllables Johnny's answer leaped from his lips:

"Since you speak of it, tell her the whole truth!"

"That's what I intend!" Turning to Molly the old man said: "When I surprised him, he made a lot of talk about bringin' you a present. Ain't no need of a forty-dollar-a-month cow-punch spendin' his money bringin' you presents, and lookin' for some favor in return. Ain't nothin' money would buy that I've ever refused you."

Molly tried to protest, but the old man waved her down.

"Don't tell me I'm puttin' it too strong. He's got his eye set on you; told me so to my face."

Kent saw bitter tears flood the girl's eyes, but he went on.

"This is all true talk, Molly," he asserted. "Look at the man—he may be a romantic figure

in your eyes, seein' you're so young, but I'm tellin' you that nine months a year he's flat broke! It'd take him three months to earn the price of the dress you're wearin'. I ain't raised you careful-like, givin' you every advantage a girl ought to have to see you waste yourself on a forty-dollar man!"

Level-eyed now, Molly searched the faces of the two men before her. Johnny Dice had spoken no word of love to her. Yes, but love was not a thing of words. It was something that came to life of its own volition, and grew and grew until it caught the hearts of men and women in a vise. Only when it had made its presence known would retrospection reveal the hundred little ways in which it had sought to announce itself from the very beginning.

Molly was permitted such a moment. What she beheld left her body trembling. Was this love? Did she love Johnny Dice? The thought had never occurred to her before. Was this feeling of comradeship, this boy and girl friendship, love? At least the thought was not unpleasant to her. Poor he might be, but Johnny was too much

a man to be unworthy of love. The more she thought of it the greater became the tug on her heart. Anger, resentment, all her other emotions were blotted out. Even her insistence on fair play between the two men became less vital to the girl.

Whether she knew it or not, Molly was taking sides. And, as women have done down through the ages, she turned from her own to champion the man who desired her. She was no longer the judge, but the counsel for the defense.

"Were you better off at his age, father?" she asked.

Kent must have sensed the widening between them, for he answered almost surlily: "Times have changed. What was good enough for me ain't good enough for you. Did he show you the picture of you he's got in his pocket? Your picture—carryin' it around!"

"Why, no, father. I can't believe it. I haven't had a picture taken in years."

"Well, it was years since this one was took. You know the one you've got framed and hanging beside your door? He's got a copy of it. I

asked him for it. I don't want my little girl's picture goin' the rounds of the cow camps. He wouldn't give it up. Said he'd ask you if he could keep it. He didn't, did he? Made some wild talk about its belonging to a dead man."

"Dead man!" The words chilled the girl. She turned questioningly to Johnny. With rising suspicion she saw the boy nod his head in answer to the interrogation in her eyes.

"Let me see it!" she demanded, stretching out her hands toward Johnny, who was drawing the picture from his pocket.

One glance at it was enough for the girl.

"Father!" she exclaimed. "It is my picture."

"Of course," the old man snapped. "Ask him how he came by it."

"Johnny, tell me," Molly cried, "what does it all mean? What is this talk of 'dead man'? From whom did you get this picture?"

And now Johnny faced Kent.

"From Crosbie Traynor," said the boy.

"From Crosbie Traynor," Molly repeated slowly.

The old man's smile failed him this time. He

choked over his words as he fought to repress his excitement. "Traynor! Traynor!" he cried at last. "What's all this talk of him?"

Molly was sobbing.

"Father, father," she murmured, "I'm so afraid, so frightened. This picture, this letter, death, murder—what does it mean, what does it mean?"

The letter crinkled in Kent's bony hands as he tried to hold it steady enough to read it. He seemed to sicken as he read; lines came into his face; he breathed with difficulty; with shaking hands he clutched at his collar to loosen it.

As the button snapped under the strain and his hand came away he flashed a glance at the boy. Quick, ferretlike, it was.

Johnny's face was wooden. Even his eyes were emotionless. For the moment Molly was unconscious of his presence. Dumbly she stared at the older man. She saw him sink into a chair, gasping for breath; but she did not run to his side to comfort him. Something unexplainable made her draw back. And she knew that she did, and the knowledge crucified her. A blush of shame

mounted to her cheeks—that she could watch the misery of her own and be untouched by it. And she felt herself urged on. This was not yet the end.

“Father,” she heard herself saying, “do you understand that reference to my not going near the shipping pens? The Diamond-Bar shipped from here on the sixth last year and the year before. Mr. Traynor thought you would be there. Please don’t lie to me, father. You can’t deny that you knew this man.”

Seconds slipped by, with Kent’s spasmodic breathing the only sound to break the stillness.

At last the old man spoke.

“No, Molly,” he said with an effort. “I can’t deny it any longer. I knew Traynor. You’ve never heard his name on my lips before. Your mother knew him, too. God forbid that you should. Trouble always followed him. He was such another as this man here. He made my life a hell. I didn’t want anythin’ but to keep out of his way. I never expected to see him again. A skunk is always a skunk. I’m glad he’s dead!”

"Then you recognized him the other night in Standing Rock, eh?" Johnny asked.

"Of course!"

"Well, why didn't you admit it?"

"Are you dumb enough to ask that? Do you think I wanted my girl's name mixed up with a killin'? Ain't no Kent goin' to be mixed up like that. Me and mine stay clean. Let the dead take care of themselves. No one but you figured he'd been killed. Plain enough he did it himself. He was that kind. If he figured on meetin' me here, it was to make a touch. But he's dead now and he'll stay dead. He's gone where he'll never put the tongues of folks on my child. Whether he killed himself or was murdered makes no difference to me."

"Justice don't mean anythin' to you, eh?"

"You've known me for nigh on ten years. You can take your own answer to your question from that. Traynor was a lowdown, ornery reptile. He didn't get less than his deserts!"

Johnny shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he said grimly, "but I don't believe you. I'll have my own answer before I'm

through. No act or word of mine will bring any harm to your daughter. Her good opinion of me is the most precious thing I possess. I aim to keep it. I can't figure any easier way to lose it than to let her think I'm two-faced. I finish what I start! You've made me look small with your talk and insinuations. If I didn't tell her about the picture and of my own run-in with you, it was because I knew she was too upset to hear it now. But I said I'd ask her—and I'm doin' it this minute."

Johnnie turned his back on the old man and came close to Molly's side.

"You've heard it all, Molly," said Johnny. "You know what I'm askin'—I want to keep that picture. Am I fit to have it?"

Without looking up, Molly handed the picture to him. It was a confession of faith well calculated to arouse the best in the boy.

"And about my comin' to the ranch," he went on. "If you asked me to come to-morrow I'd come, and nothin' wouldn't stop me. But I can't see that it would serve any purpose. From now on I go alone. Even Tony stays behind. As it is,

I've not been frank with him. What I find out no one but me 'll know. If there's talk you'll know who to blame. If ever you want me, you get word to the Basque; he'll find me. And—*good-bye.*”

He was gone; nor did he hear the girl's softly murmured answer.

CHAPTER XV.

MADEIRAS GETS A CHANCE.

MOLLY had quite forgotten that the Langwell girls had arranged a bridge party for her that afternoon. When three o'clock passed and their guest had not returned, Miss Sue Langwell set out to find her.

Bridge was remote from Molly's mind, but Sue's interruption was welcomed by old Jackson and he urged the girl to run along. Molly, with pardonable caution, tried to conceal her distraught condition and keep from her friend's eyes any inkling of what had occurred. To succeed, she allowed herself to be carried off.

With gratitude in his heart, Kent watched the two girls ride away in Sue's car. It effectually put an end to talk. There had been too much of that already this day. So while Molly played cards and the old man sought forgetfulness in

the doing of purely routine business, Johnny talked to old Dan Secor.

Dan had exhausted himself at noon, so Johnny went back to Tony.

Madeiras was in a bad humor. He had been waiting these many hours for Johnny and felt himself slighted, left out of something.

Your Basque is thin-skinned and quick to resent a fancied hurt.

"What's wrong?" Johnny asked.

"Too much," replied Tony. "For why I come wit' you? I don' lak theese bus'ness, always be left behin'."

The last hour had frayed Johnny's nerves. The Basque's petulance found him without the patience to accept it for what it was. "Don't ride me, Tony," he grumbled. "I know what I'm doin'."

"*Sí!* But *Madre de Dios*, I be dam' eef I do!"

"Ain't you willin' to follow my lead? When you stay back, it's because it's best you do. We ain't on no picnic. Things may break so that you'll go on and I'll stay behind."

"I guess you no stay behin' much, Johnny."

"Well, you threw up your job for me. We

stick till this thing's over and we've caught on somewhere else."

"Those job mean not'ing. Tony Madeiras always get job.

"Then what in hell's on your mind?"

The Basque grinned. He was getting a little action at last. "Maybe," he said bombastically, "Tony Madeiras mak' good deetecteeve, too. But how I know. I don't get no chance."

"Just what is it that you want to do?" demanded Johnny.

"Mebbe I go ask Kent for my job. Mebbe somet'ing happen on the Diamond-Bar. Mebbe that old fool t'ink I go back on you, eh? Then Tony Madeiras use hees nose and hees eyes."

"Good Lord!" Johnny cried as he banged the table. "You're elected—unanimously! I'm goin' to Elk Valley in half an hour. You stay behind. Kent's still here. Meet him. Let him see that you've turned me down. He'll jump at the chance to hire you on. Miss Molly 'll hate you. Play it out, though. If you think you ought to see me, come to the Reservation. The agent will know where I am."

Tony's good nature blossomed again. Intrigue held a peculiar bouquet for the Basque. Danger, adventure—hadn't his race answered to them for centuries?

Ten minutes later Johnny came downstairs by himself. A drink, and a farewell nod to Whitey, the bartender, and he was off.

Kent saw him go, and followed his progress until the boy was lost in the dust and heat waves dancing about the base of Winnemucca Mountain. Turning back to the hotel office the old man saw Tony. The Basque was pounding upon the desk for the clerk. "How much I owe theese place?" he demanded.

"Not a cent. Your pal paid the bill."

"Johnny Dice, he's no pal wit' me," the Basque announced angrily. "Remember this: Tony Madeiras pay hees own way."

He knew that Kent was listening, but he never glanced in the cattleman's direction. Instead, he stamped into the bar and ordered a drink. There he poured into Whitey's ear the story of his break with Johnny.

"You t'ink I stay behin', me? No! I am a

Madeiras. I belong up front, you bat my life on that."

Head erect, Tony started for the door. Kent was waiting for him. When the Basque reached the sidewalk the old man stopped him.

"What's all this talk?" he demanded.

"I'm t'rough wit' Johnny Dice," the Basque said explosively. "I lose my job for heem. He say we catch man what keel those fellow at the Rock. How I catch heem, when all the time I'm tol' to keep shut up—don' say not'ing, don' do not'ing. *Válgame Dios!* You t'ink Tony Madeiras ees dam fool?"

"You've acted like it," old Kent declared. "Winter's comin' on; you had a good job, but you threw it up for a harum-scarum kid. Didn't take you long to find out where you stood with him, did it? Smart Alecks don't go far. Guess you'll learn."

"I learn pretty dam' good, all right," Tony admitted. "Now I go look for job."

"You won't find the lookin' too good," the boss of the Diamond-Bar assured him.

"Well, Tony Madeiras ees good vaquero. No

man deny that. Mebbe you tak' me on again, eh?"

Kent was no fool. He had felt this question a full half minute before it was asked. He was only too glad to get the man; but he shrewdly forced the Basque to his knees.

"Well, I don't know," he said. "We don't need men till spring. If I did take you on, chances are you'd be flyin' up and walkin' off first time you felt like it. If a man is workin' for me, he's workin' for *me*. I don't have to put up with the sort of nonsense you and that slipper-tongue tried to run on me."

"Mebbe I'm beeg fool once, but not beeg fool twice."

"If you mean it," Kent said dictatorially, "you're on. You got your horse and stuff here, ain't yuh? Well, git my girl's pony and head for the ranch. I'll be there before you come."

It was the old man's intention to take the train for Argenta that evening, and drive to the ranch from there. He wondered what Molly would say when she learned of Tony's return to the Diamond-Bar fold. The thought was uppermost in

his mind as he left the hotel. He had Johnny "on his own" now, and Kent felt that he had gained a definite advantage.

Long before he met Molly the old man had determined not to say a word about the incident to her. If he did she would be apt to resent his hiring the Basque. Let her find out for herself. It wouldn't hurt to have her hear Johnny Dice's shortcomings retailed by other lips than his.

Molly and the Langwell girls came for Kent at six and carried him off to the Langwell home for supper. Molly seemed in better spirits and old Jackson felt relieved. He tried to inveigle the girls into accompanying them to the Diamond-Bar. They begged off for this time.

Molly guessed the reason in back of the invitation. With the Langwell girls on hand there would have been little or no chance for a resumption of the scenes of this afternoon. It would have only delayed matters. Molly intended to know more about Crosbie Traynor before the subject was dropped.

The ride to Argenta took but little time. The drive to the ranch, however, was a matter of some

three hours. The old man outdid himself in trying to keep Molly's mind far from Johnny Dice and the dead man. He exhausted himself before the ranch was reached, and dreaded the remaining miles. Molly, however, surprised him by not once referring to the subject which obsessed both of them. It was not delicacy on the girl's part which made her hold her tongue. She had heard more than enough for the present. It was her way to ponder over a matter for a day or two. Questions would be asked and she would be answered, but not to-night.

CHAPTER XVI.

BITTER FRUIT.

FOR all of the old man's talk there was plenty to do on the Diamond-Bar. The men were back from the Rock, but early the following morning big Hobe had sent them off on various tasks so that life on the ranch moved as usual.

Before noon Tony arrived. Molly's eyes opened as she saw who it was that led her pony into the yard. A dozen questions leaped to her mind. She even looked about for Johnny. What could the Basque be doing here?

Five minutes of heated conversation with Tony told her what she wanted to know.

"As long as I live," she advised him, "I shall never again trust a Basque. That Johnny wronged you unintentionally doesn't enter into it. He thought so much of you. You were pals. Humph, pals! A pal sticks right or wrong." Molly turned back to the house. "I hope your

horse throws you and breaks your wretched neck," she hurled at him for a parting shot.

Tony winced. He had received more than he had bargained for, but he was game. He clucked his tongue to show his utter contempt for Johnny Dice.

Infuriated, Molly slammed the door behind her. The old man had seen this pass-at-arms, and although he had heard no word of it, he could guess what had been said. He promised himself that it was only the beginning. Before he was through Molly would be thoroughly disillusioned as far as Johnny Dice was concerned.

Noontime brought two visitors to the Diamond-Bar—Aaron Gallup and his "man Friday," Tobias Gale.

Aaron made a business of loaning money at six or seven per cent on first mortgages. Tobias saw to the details, such little matters as the rate, for instance. He was a Dickensian character, humble to self-effacement, but always driving a hard bargain. More than one rancher in Ruby Valley had cause to regret Tobias.

The man moved in an aura of gloom. His

was a funereal appearance, clothes of ancient cut, once black, but long since faded to a dull bottle-green. His coming to a ranch-house was equivalent to the visit of the undertaker. No one knew his age, but if it were to be guessed from his wrinkled, mummified face one would have put him down for eighty.

Tobias was a usurer, intended from birth for his present calling. Old Aaron had given him his opportunity and he rewarded the coroner with faithful service.

Gallup no longer rode in a saddle. He had a weatherbeaten old buckboard and a pair of mean-eyed mustangs to get him about. This turnout, when not in use by Aaron, served Tobias. So the rig and its span of ponies came to be associated with bad luck, hard times and overdue interest money. That is, it did when only one of the precious pair adorned it. Whenever Aaron and Tobias appeared together it meant more than overdue payments; it spelled foreclosure!

Jackson Kent thought of this as he caught sight of the two men.

"Howdy?" Gallup called as he pulled up his team.

"What are you two birds of prey doin' here to-day?" Kent called jestingly as he walked out to the rig. "Ain't come to foreclose?"

Tobias cackled at his pleasantry. Gallup chose to be more serious. "Wouldn't be so bold as that about it," he said. "Just come to talk things over a little. Saw some of your boys a ways back. I seen Madeiras as we turned in. What's he doin' here?"

"Back on his job," Kent grinned. "He had more sense than you allowed him."

"Glad to hear it," Gallup answered. "Where's that rearin', tearin' Dice person? Bet he ain't back."

"He'll never git back! Where he is or what he's doin' don't interest me. Hey, you, Charlie Paul!" Kent called to his Piute teamster. "Take care of this team."

The three men entered Kent's office as the Indian led away the horses.

"Well, what you got on your mind, Aaron?" the cowman asked when they were seated.

"Two or three things. Come to think of it, that remark of yours about foreclosin' wa'n't so wide of the mark, only it ain't a matter of money—that is, not exactly—that I'm thinkin' about. To be right truthful, Jackson, it's a promise of yours I came to foreclose on."

"In regard to the notes?"

"No-o-o. In regard to the girl."

"Molly?"

"You guessed it. Last time I was here, some four months ago, you promised me you'd talk to her. I ain't forgot how she treated me, but I don't carry no grudges. I'm here to-day to ask her again."

Kent's face fell as he heard the man declare himself.

"Ain't been four months, has it?" he asked.

"Four months to the day," Gallup stated.

"That's correct, ain't it, Toby?"

Aaron's factotum nodded his head.

"Don't seem so long as that to me," Jackson said unhappily. "Maybe we'd better talk this over just between the two of us," he suggested.

"No-o-o. Toby knows my dark side. I ain't got no secrets from him."

"Your dark side, eh?" Kent queried. "I've heard tell as how you were pretty well tanned all over, Aaron."

"No doubt. When a man owes you money, he can find a lot to tell about you. I don't mean that personal. You know how it is—men borrow money and then they don't want to pay it back. Makes a hard name for the folks what does the lendin'. Speakin' of money, it just reminds me that I've got close to a hundred thousand dollars out on interest now. Toby can give you the exact figgers. That ought to make a little difference with the girl."

"Won't make no difference with her," Kent declared. "She's always known her own mind; but even so, she's changed since you saw her last. She defied me yesterday for the first time in her life. The girl's bewitched. She thinks she's in love with Johnny Dice."

"You ain't tellin' me any news," Gallup muttered. "I been suspectin' that this long time—"

another reason why I'm here to-day. You better tell her I've come. I want to talk to her."

Kent got to his feet uneasily. Biting the ends of his mustache he took a turn around his desk.

"Man, I can't do it!" he exclaimed at last. "This, on top of what we were through yesterday, will turn her against me for life."

"Well, Jackson, a promise is a promise. You don't want to forget that in more ways than one you owe this ranch to me. It was me who gave you a start. Whenever you needed help you've always come to me. I'm old, I know. I ain't askin' her to love me. Love is for young bucks.

"I'm a man of means, now. Mrs. Aaron Gallup will be a somebody in this country long after I've cashed in. She's got youth, she's pretty, and that's what I want. When we run down to Frisco folk 'll turn and look twice at her; like as not they'll have pictures in the papers, too, of her and me. We'll let 'em know we're somebody. And that's what I want. It's what I've been wantin' all the years I've been savin' pennies and cheatin' myself out of things no man should be without."

"But it's sellin' her," Kent groaned. "Sellin'

her like she was a slave. Maybe I've been dreamin' my dreams, too. What's goin' to happen to me, an old man, without her? I've slaved and cheated myself even as you have. It was for her. Don't smile at me like that. You're hearin' the truth. Damn it, I tell you, I'll let you cut off my right arm before I'll see her your wife."

"Well, now, I don't know about that," Gallup drawled menacingly. "Right arms ain't so precious. Maybe you're forgettin' that I'm holding your paper for thirty thousand dollars. It's overdue, too. The way the market is, don't seem as if there'd be much chance of your payin' up right off."

"The ranch is worth five times the amount I owe you."

"Of course, of course. Tobias consented to the loans, didn't he? Toby don't get over his head."

"Are you puttin' it flat to me, then, that you git my girl, or else you foreclose on my paper?"

"You understand me perfectly, Jackson."

"Well, then, foreclose, and to hell with you!" Kent roared, supreme for the moment.

Gallup did not move, neither did his eyes leave Jackson's face. A minute passed before he spoke.

"Yes? You're goin' to make a pauper out of her, eh, so Dice can put himself in her class and run off with her? You'd better reconsider. Toby and me 'll go outside and look around the place while you do."

CHAPTER XVII.

GALLUP'S PRICE.

KENT slunk into his chair as they left him. He had foreseen this day, but events had so happened since the steer-shipping as to leave his mind no time to worry about it. But now, by comparison, Johnny Dice and his evil genius seemed of minor importance. Not for a second did Kent think of begging off. He knew Gallup too well.

Yes, and Gallup knew Jackson Kent. Five years before this he would not have dared to beard him as he had done this day. But Kent was no longer the man of old. The last two years had been too much for the cattleman. Every ounce of his energy had gone into fighting the perverse fate which lately seemed to pursue all cattlemen.

So, while Kent drank the dregs of despair, Aaron and Tobias wandered about, confident that old Jackson would back down. What was left

of the man's fighting spirit might disintegrate slowly, but time would accomplish it.

Half an hour sufficed—thirty minutes of life which Jackson Kent would never forget. Slow of step and heavy of heart he made his way to Molly's room.

The girl glanced sharply at him as she noted his nervousness.

"We've got visitors," the old man began.

"Madeiras, you mean," Molly exclaimed.

"What is he doing here?"

"Begged me for a job. Hobe needs him, so I let him come."

"Why didn't you tell me that he was the man you had found to bring out my pony?"

"I don't know, Molly. The two of us are at swords' points all the time lately. I knew if I told you that Tony had broken with Dice, that you'd think I'd had somethin' to do with it. The Basque came to me; I didn't seek him out. But no matter, it ain't Madeiras I'm referrin' to now; it's Gallup and Tobias Gale. Maybe you can guess what Gallup wants. It breaks my heart to tell you."

"Oh, father, father!" Molly cried. "Do I have to go through with that again? I promise you I'll kill myself before I'll marry that man."

"I begged off the last time he was here," the old man wailed. "I can't do it to-day. You don't know it, but Gallup's holdin' my paper for thirty thousand dollars. It's overdue. He's demandin' his money or you. I told him to foreclose, and he laughed at me. He doesn't want the money, little girl. It's you he's aimin' to take away from me."

"When he was here four months ago, I told him I'd try to talk you into marryin' him. I hadn't no intention of doin' that. I figured prices were goin' up and that come shippin' time they be high enough to give me the cash to square up with him. The market didn't go thata-way, though. Now he wants me to trade you like a slave so that I can keep the ranch. And that after tellin' me he's got over a hundred thousand out at from six per cent up. What am I goin' to do? Tell me that, little girl, what am I goin' to do?"

The old man choked over his words, and turned his head away as tears filled his eyes.

Unable to control herself, Molly threw her arms about his neck. "Buck up, father," she pleaded. "Let me talk to him. He'll not frighten me."

Molly was as good as her word.

"Tell that man to leave the room," she ordered, pointing to Tobias. "What I have to say to you I'll not say before him. Make him go!"

Tobias went.

"Now Aaron Gallup," Molly rushed on, "just what have you come to say?"

Aaron steeled himself for his answer. "I've come to ask you to marry me," he said.

"You have, eh? Have you forgotten what I told you the last time you were here? Do you think you are less unlovely to me to-day than you were then?"

"Reckon not," Aaron mumbled. "Looks ain't my long suit. Looks in a man ain't worth nothin'. It's wimmen that needs looks—wimmen like you. You got looks enough for both of us."

"You are a fool!" the girl exclaimed angrily.

"No wonder Johnny Dice laughed at you. When he finds out who killed Crosbie Traynor he'll show you out of Shoshone County for the imbecile that you are!"

"Crosbie Traynor?" Aaron asked, eyes narrowing.

"Yes, Crosbie Traynor! You didn't even know the man's name. Johnny has only begun. He won't give up until he can prove who killed that man."

"So?" Aaron questioned provokingly. "You seem to be partial to Johnny Dice. Your father tells me you think you're in love with him."

"Father knows more than I do if he told you that. But when I compare Johnny Dice with such as you I'm almost convinced that I do love him."

"Then I suppose you ain't goin' to listen to your father." Gallup shook his head pityingly. "Too bad. He's worked hard for you. It 'll kill him to lose this place, and lose it he will if you keep on. Children ain't like they used to be. Time was when a girl did as her father asked."

Molly turned questioningly to Jackson Kent.

"Father!" she queried. "Are you asking me to marry this man?"

Jackson wiped his eyes.

"I don't know, Molly," he said with a sigh. "Would it be too hard on yuh? Gallup's got money; you'd have everything you'd want."

"So you would," Aaron hastened to supplement. "I ain't askin' for love. I'd treat you kind. Ain't nothin' I wouldn't do for you."

"Oh, I don't want to seem ungrateful or be disloyal, or go back on my own flesh and blood; but in my heart I believe you are both against me. If I refuse to marry this man I condemn my father to poverty; and if I take him I condemn my own soul. Oh, God, what am I to do?"

"I wouldn't worry too much about my soul if I was you," Aaron confided to her. "Souls have a way of takin' care of themselves. They ain't under any expense."

"What a fitting estimate of yourself, Aaron Gallup!" Molly cried scathingly. "No! I shall not marry you. Never! I will repay my father even as he paid me—with my youth. He toiled and slaved for me; I'll do the same. If we lose

the ranch I'll work as no woman ever worked before—nothing shall be too hard for me; but I will not marry *you!*”

Gallup got to his feet. “You think it over to-night,” he advised. “Your father ’ll see that you don’t run away. I’ll be back to-morrow for my answer. And I’ll have a deputy sheriff and a minister with me. It will be up to you to decide which man we’ll need.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

"KILL HIM, THE THIEF!"

LATE evening of the day on which he had left Winnemucca saw Johnny encamped on the North Fork for the night. Early the following morning he breakfasted on trout and flap-jacks and essayed going over the hills in an airline to the Reservation.

The creek was soon left behind. On the high rimrocks and hills above it there was no trail, and the boy spent tedious hours in picking out his way. At high noon he began dropping into the valley.

He had no plan of procedure, so quite naturally he first made for the Agency. The Agent was not there; but he found Bill Ames, the post trader, at home. Bill had seen no strangers in the last week or two. Maybe Thunder Bird had. Indians never talked much. Johnny could ask

him. The old chief and his sons were killing rabbits down below.

Down below Johnny went.

"How, chief?" he greeted the old man, a creature of unassailable dignity even in his rags. "You catch 'em rabbits, eh?"

"Nah! Boy catch 'em. Me too old."

There was a note of resignation in the old chief's answer quite beyond what the words themselves convey. Men said that Thunder Bird remembered the Forty-Niners and the Donner party. It might have been even as they said, for there was a look in the chief's eyes as old as the beginning of time.

Johnny spread his blanket and beckoned to the aged Indian to be seated. This formality accomplished, the boy opened a tin of tobacco and poured its contents on to the blanket. With his fingers he divided it. Not in equal portions. Oh, no! As he originally poured the piles they were approximately even, but without glancing up the boy kept on transferring small pinches of the tobacco from his own to the chief's portion until Thunder Bird's share was four times Johnny's.

Then he produced cigarette papers, and from his share rolled cigarettes for the old man. To attempt to describe the expression on Thunder Bird's face as he watched Johnny would be wasted effort. The chief's hair was white, his face gaunt, shriveled; his jaws toothless; if such a combination can mirror the innocence of childhood it was achieved in the old Piute.

In back of him, at a respectable distance, Thunder Bird's squaw sat, expressionless, watching the dumb show.

"*Hé,*" the old man grunted at last. "Mebbe you come look for mine this time."

"No look for mine, Thunder Bird. Look for stranger—white man. You see him on Reservation last two moons?"

The Indian did not answer for several minutes. Then:

"No see um stranger."

"Rode a stallion, big horse—a roan," Johnny persisted.

"Spanish horse, eh?"

"That's it—Spanish."

"Mebbe I see um." A pause, and then a shrug

of the shoulders. "No can tell. Too old. Why you want um? Steal horse?"

Johnny tried hard to conceal his impatience.

"No steal 'em horse," he answered. Johnny spread his fingers, palms up. "Him friend—*un ladrón le ha muerto!*"

"Ah, nah—dead?"

For an instant the old chief's eyes seemed to lose their guile. Johnny's pulse quickened at what he thought was a note of concern in Thunder Bird's voice.

"Dead," he repeated. "Maybe you see him, Thunder Bird?"

"Mebbe so boy see um," the chief countered. "You come to-morrow, eh?"

Johnny knew it would be useless to urge haste. To-morrow he would have his answer and not sooner. It would be an answer worth waiting for. If Thunder Bird had known Traynor and had had a hand in his death, then he would deny everything to-morrow. If Traynor had been his friend, the Indian would speak out. If neither of these suppositions were true, it followed that Thunder Bird's runners would comb the Reser-

vation. If Traynor had set foot in Elk Valley the Piute chief would know by morning.

Johnny went back to the store to eat supper with the trader and to spend the evening in his company. Just before he reached the post he came face to face with Charlie Paul, Kent's teamster.

The Indian had come to the Reservation from the ranch, a distance of sixty miles, in less than four hours. A fair bit of riding when one considers the country over which he traveled. The effort left the man calm, unhurried. He had stolen away and surmised that he came on an urgent errand, but no trace of excitement was on his face.

Molly had appeared soon after Gallup's departure, and upon asking for her pony, had been told that she was not to leave the house. Angry words followed, and Molly, defying the old man, had set off at a brisk walk for the hills.

Kent called to Madeiras to follow her and keep her in sight until she came home. The command to the Basque was enough to dissuade the girl. She preferred being locked in her room to being

spied upon by Madeiras. Later she became aware of the Basque's presence on the porch outside her window. Kent worked in his office, door open. Molly saw that she was a prisoner. And why a prisoner unless she was to be forced to marry Gallup?

This very day Molly had denied that she loved Johnny, but it was of him that she thought now. If any one could save her, he could. If she could get word to him, he'd come.

It was the old man's habit to fall asleep after dinner. The girl waited and listened for the sound of his asthmatic snoring. She had penned a note to Johnny. When she felt sure that the way to the rear of the house was open to her she crept out and found Charlie Paul. Her instructions to him were brief and without any definite destination. Johnny was somewhere on the Reservation. Charlie Paul would know how to find him.

Ten minutes later the Piute had streaked away from the Diamond-Bar. In the eyes of the law he had stolen the horse which he rode; his job was gone, and he was on the side of danger—

all of this just to repay the girl for the respect she had always shown him. Pretty good stuff, that, for an Indian.

"Hello, you, Charlie Paul!" Johnny called.

Charlie Paul smiled. "How?" he grunted. "Me find you."

"Find me? How come?"

Charlie grinned as he handed Molly's letter to Johnny. He was an Indian, but he knew a thing or two.

Johnny lost his happy-go-lucky air as he read the following brief note:

"JOHNNY:

"I am a prisoner here at the ranch. Aaron Gallup came to-day. Father insists that I marry him. The man is coming back to-morrow with a minister.

"Madeiras is here, too, the traitor! If Charlie Paul finds you I know you will come.

"MOLLY."

"Good boy, you, Charlie Paul," Johnny said warmly, laying a hand upon the Indian's arm.

"You savvy what's up?"

"Pretty well me savvy."

"Plenty fight' comin'," Johnny told him.

"Shots, kill maybe—all right, you?"

"All right, me," Charlie said simply.

"You got rifle?" the boy asked anxiously.

"Me got um. On North Fork."

"Hide out, eh? Buried?"

"*Hé*," Charlie laughed mockingly. "I find um."

Indeed, Charlie Paul was no fool. White men were not taking away his gun. He had it where he could reach it when needed.

"We go now?" the Indian asked.

"No, Charlie. Horse too tired. Picket the ponies. We eat and sleep. Moonup we go. Save horses, keep him fresh. Breakfast time we come by ranch. Ride like hell then. You savvy?"

"Me savvy."

For the time being Johnny gave up any thought of old Thunder Bird or Crosbie Traynor. He cursed aloud whenever he thought of Molly married to Gallup. Well, it would never come to pass. Not if he had to kill the man.

After sundown they rode to the trader's store and bought supplies enough to last them a week. Before twilight was over they were out of Elk Valley and heading for the North Fork. Sunup

found them hovering close to the ranch. Rose Creek, a branch of the North Fork, flowed past the house. As usual with desert creeks, its course was marked by a screening of willows and buckthorn. In this cover Johnny left Charlie Paul with their ponies and a led one which the Indian had obtained from the old chief.

"A minute or two after the breakfast bells rings," the boy told the Indian, "I'm goin' to crawl up to the house. You stay here. You keep me in range. Some man may stop me. If I raise my hand—like this—you shoot. Right?"

"*Bueno*," Charlie answered. "Like that"—he imitated Johnny's signal—"and I shoot."

In a few minutes the Chinese cook rang his gong and the men began trooping from the bunk-house for their morning meal. Johnny waited no longer. On his hands and knees he began crawling through the sagebrush.

Fifteen minutes later he had reached the front porch, the floor of which was a good foot above the ground. Noiselessly he crept beneath it. From this shelter he stuck out a long willow gad

and began tapping on the window of Molly's room.

The girl had been awake most of the night, and it did not take long for this repeated tapping to draw her attention.

"Johnny!" she gasped as she caught sight of the boy's face protruding from the space below the porch.

"Get dressed quickly!" he ordered. "Don't take over ten minutes."

And, turtlelike, Johnny drew in his head and left Molly to jump into her clothes. She whistled to him softly when she was ready.

"Come through the window," he bade her. A second later she stood on the porch beside him.

"Charlie's in the willows with horses," he said tersely. "You streak it now. I'll stop them if they catch sight of you."

Just a clasp of the hands and she was gone. She had covered more than half of the distance to the creek before Johnny started to follow her. He had not taken twenty steps when the front door flew open and Kent dashed out, gun in hand.

"You freeze where you are or I'll blow your head off!" the old man roared.

Johnny tarried not, but sped away as Kent's gun barked again and again. Johnny turned and fired over his shoulder as he ran. Molly was at the creek. A second or two ought to see her mounted. Dropping to his knees, Johnny emptied his pistol at the house.

The firing had brought twenty men to the old man's side. Johnny could hear him yelling:

"He's stealin' my girl! Kill him! Kill him! The thief!"

The bullets began kicking up the dust at Johnny's feet. He had to run for it now.

"Let's ride!" he cried as he made the trees. "They're goin' for their horses. We won't have five minutes' start on 'em."

The drumming of their ponies' hoofs upon the hard-packed road told Kent that they had got away.

"Where are we heading for?" Molly cried as they raced along.

"God knows!" Johnny called to her. "Idaho, maybe. To the North Fork first, and then that

old stage trail to Boise. . I figured we could slip away and cross the line on the run. Can't do it now! There's an old mine tunnel near the trail where it drops down the Tuscaroras. We'll hole up there till night. Got food and water there."

Molly was crying, even though she rode at a breakneck pace.

"Don't—don't let them take me back," she begged.

"They won't!" Johnny cried grimly. "You'll never marry Aaron Gallup! I'll see to that."

CHAPTER XIX.

“COME AND GET HIM!”

LONG before Johnny's party made the hills they could see that they were closely followed. The dust cloud in back of them came on apace. For an hour the fugitives held their advantage. After that the pursuers' fresh horses began to gain.

“You think we make the mine?” Johnny cried to Charlie Paul.

Charlie weighed his answer before delivering it. “Mebbe, I guess we make um.”

The Indian patted his rifle and pulled up his horse. Johnny nodded. In another second they had left Charlie far behind. Johnny strained his ears for sound of the Indian's firing. It came, then, a quick *rat-tat-tat-tat!* Other guns began to roar. The cañon which Johnny and Molly were ascending began to echo and reëcho the shooting.

They kept on, Molly half mad, Johnny watch-

ing their horses. Some time later Charlie Paul caught up with them, his horse dripping lather.

"We make um mine now," he said with a grin.

They still had ten long, uphill miles ahead of them. Johnny began to believe they would make it. But what about to-night? The horses they rode would have to face the test again then. The boy knew they would never meet it.

Better to drive them now to their last ounce of endurance and make sure of temporary safety.

"Give 'em the spurs!" he cried. "Crowd 'em!"

With it all they were none too soon. Ten minutes after they had entered the mine, their horses ahead of them, the posse swung around the bend below.

"They can't be dumb enough to miss us," Johnny grumbled. "Some of them may go by; but they'll be back. We'll fight it out here."

Charlie and he crawled out upon the tailings from the mine, and there, flat on their stomachs, they watched the men swarming below them.

"Spotted us first crack," the boy said with a

growl. "I knew it! Couldn't fool old Hobe. He savvies this country."

"Me shoot now?" Charlie questioned.

"No, not now. By and by we shoot. They won't smoke us out of here in a hurry."

Down below the men were spreading out fan-wise. Johnny caught glimpses of them as they moved from cover to cover. They had sent their horses down the cañon.

Charlie Paul glanced at Johnny. He understood the movement below. The pursuers were circling them. Being an Indian, Charlie knew that it was very bad to wait for that circle to close. Death was usually the price of it.

"No good wait," he argued. "No use shoot bimeby."

"Let 'em shoot first," Johnny counseled. "They used to be my friends. Reckon they ain't now. When we shoot we'll shoot to kill."

Half an hour passed without a gun being fired. Johnny felt reasonably safe. The mine was perched on the side of the mountain high above the surrounding country. In front of the tunnel the ground fell away rapidly to a small flat sev-

enty-five yards below. Across this flat the attack would eventually come.

Kent might surround the mountain and thus cut off his quarry's escape, but Johnny did not worry about being ambushed from behind. Only a mountain sheep could climb up those walls of basalt.

Kent must have come to the same conclusion, for his forces began to close in on the flat. Stuffy Tyler made it first. Johnny's gun barked as the man started to dash across the flat. Tyler crawled back to shelter behind a boulder.

"Next man who tries that gets killed," Johnny yelled.

The word brought Molly to the boy's side. He pulled her down. "Don't stand thata-way," he warned her.

"Is there going to be killing here, Johnny?" Molly asked chokingly.

"Reckon there's certain to be."

"Father's down there. I—I wouldn't want him killed—"

"He'll have to look out for himself," Johnny said without a second's hesitancy. "It's me or

him. This thing goes through to a finish this time. You go back in the tunnel a ways. There'll be shootin' directly."

Dismissed, beside herself with worry and hopelessness, Molly crawled back to safety. In her heart there was no malice toward Johnny. He was in danger at her request. It made him the master. He was fighting for her!

Her deductions were as primitive as a cave-woman's. Likewise, they were uncommonly sound.

Kent had his forces in position now, and from behind boulders a half dozen men dashed for the flat. Charlie Paul did not wait for Johnny's permission to fire. Johnny's gun began flashing, too. Two men with arms limp at their sides scurried back. Three others, uninjured, followed them. One man—Stub Rawlings—lay face upward in the open, pawing the ground with his legs, one of which had a hole shot through it.

"Better take care of him, Hobe," Johnny cried. "Git him out of the way. Just you alone does the job."

Stalwart, unafraid, big Hobe walked into view.

"Good God, Johnny!" he shouted. "Are you crazy? I'd sure hate to shoot you down; but I'm goin' to if you don't give in. What're you goin' to do with that girl?"

"Marry her, if she'll have me."

The foreman swore a terrible oath. "You can't steal a girl like that."

"Hell I can't!" Johnny roared. "She's here, ain't she?"

"Will you give up if we let you go?" Ferris demanded.

"Ain't no givin' up this time, Hobe. Don't you be so sad about me."

"You damn fool! You pore damn fool!" he repeated over and over again as he went downhill, Stub in his arms.

There came another lull. And then reënforcements arrived for Kent—Gallup, and no less a person than Jasper Roddy, the sheriff of Shoshone County; and a man Johnny did not know, the Rev. Murray Whitaker.

There was a prodigious amount of consulta-

tion soon after Gallup arrived. The boy could see them surrounding Aaron's rig. The upshot of it was the ascent of the sheriff to the little flat.

"You hear me, there?" Roddy demanded.

"I hear you all right," Johnny replied. "But I don't like your voice."

"You're under arrest," the sheriff bawled. "Shootin' with intent to kill, and five or six other things. I want that horse-stealin' Injun what's with you, too."

"I'd admire to see you git him," Johnny laughed. "I always had a hankerin' to see just how yellow you was."

"Well, you hear me. I've sworn in each one of these men as my deputies. We're goin' to get you! You're defyin' the law now."

"Don't you scare me thata-way," Johnny answered sarcastically. "You'd better stay in the rear of your deputies, Roddy, or this mountain will be your monument, and it 'd be a shame to waste one as big as this on you."

Roddy withdrew and appeared in no hurry to close in on his prisoners. This Dice boy was thoroughly disconcerting.

Kent and Gallup tried to insist on storming the mine at once, but wily Jasper Roddy could see no sense in wasting life when it would be easier—and safer—to starve the fugitives into submission.

The morning passed without another shot being fired. The sun, uncomfortably warm for October, began searching the lower cañon and finally drove the posse into the shadow of a ledge which cut them off from Johnny's vision.

Charlie Paul and the boy dozed in turn as the afternoon wore on. Molly, stoical now, boiled coffee and fried bacon for them.

They knew they were closely watched. The westering sun, glinting on polished rifle barrels, betrayed the stalkers.

Evening came on, and with it the acrid smell of burning sagebrush as the posse prepared its supper. The first thrill of the man hunt had worn off, and Kent's men were bad-tempered.

Madeiras was there, stretched out upon the ground, half asleep. Gallup had been studying him for some time when the Basque, feeling the

man's eyes on him, sat up and stared insolently at the coroner.

"Guess you ain't sorry you're down here," Aaron growled.

"You bat my life on that," Tony answered with a grin. "We catch those fellow pretty soon."

"Catch 'em? Who wants to catch 'em? If Roddy had any guts he'd march up there and shoot 'em down. Johnny Dice ain't worth a cent to me alive."

"He mak' lot of trouble, heem."

"You said it, Madeiras! He ain't licked till he's in the ground."

"Johnny ain't worth a cent to you alive; how much he worth daid, *señor*?"

Aaron's head came up at that and he studied the Basque's face without answering. Then:

"What you drivin' at?"

"Mebbe man get up those rocks in back of heem, eh?"

"You mean you?"

"Mebbe me," Tony muttered.

"You show him to me, dead, and there'll be plenty *dinero* for you, Madeiras."

"Perhaps so, I go to jail, too."

"Not a chance. Roddy's sworn you in. If that idiot resists arrest, blow his head off and the law 'll back you up."

Tony did not appear to view the prospect with any degree of faith.

"Law no good for Basque," he stated. "Plenty Basque in jail."

"Not if I'm for you," argued Gallup.

"How I know you be for me?"

"I'm for you if you mean business. Why, here"—and Aaron drew from his pocket a buckskin bag, and undoing the draw-string, held the purse out to the Basque—"run your fingers through that! All gold, all twenties. Five hundred. It's yours if you go through with this."

Tony sent his fingers deep into the bag. A crafty light came into Gallup's eyes as the man felt the precious metal. Tony's face was working strangely. The coroner thought he read greed—success for himself in it.

But the Basque's fingers were not caressing

the gold pieces. They were searching for something more precious than money.

For weeks he had been yearning to put his fingers in that very purse. Why? A child's whim. At least the reasoning behind the desire was no more intelligent or logical than a child's.

The swarthy-faced one's teeth gleamed as he touched that mysterious thing for which he searched. A thrill passed through his arm. He was holding the gold snake Crosbie Traynor had worn on his hat band!

Reluctantly, Tony withdrew his hand.

"I do thees thing for you," he muttered. "The boy ees young, he ees in luff—the great passion ees on heem. Eet ees bad to keel a man, then. You—you're ole; luff ees not for you. But I do thees thing. I get up there. You tell Kent to keep hees men from shoot me?"

"I'll 'tend to that," Gallup said, excitedly, as he put away the purse.

"All right, I go; but thees purse, I tak' heem now!"

It was on Aaron's tongue to demur, to refuse point blank; but why be cautious? He had gold

pieces enough to fill many bags. What were five hundred dollars weighed against Molly Kent? With Johnny Dice out of the way the future was unclouded.

"Don't you double-cross me," Gallup warned as he passed the purse to the Basque.

Tony did not even reply. He was gone before Aaron had caught his breath. When he had control of himself he called to Kent and the sheriff.

"Madeiras has gone to bring them in," he told them. "He's goin' up in back of the mine. You pass the word that he's not to be picked off from below."

"The skunk!" Hobe growled when Kent told him what was happening. "I wouldn't blame the boys if they did drill him. You know how they feel toward him. Better not say anythin' to them."

It took the Basque more than an hour to get to the top. He made his plans as he moved, and they were admirable. What Charlie Paul would do was his one worry.

Molly was the first to become aware of Madeiras' presence. He was twenty-five yards above

the mine at the time, wriggling along on his stomach. The girl could not move for a second, and as she stood dumfounded she saw Tony roll a small bit of rock in Johnny's direction. It caught the boy's attention about the same instant that he saw the girl's signals. Charlie Paul had swung his rifle around so that it covered the Basque. Johnny knocked it down.

"Don't shoot," he warned. "The Basque's all right."

"All right?" Molly questioned. "Didn't he turn his back on you?"

"You don't understand. He went to the ranch on my say-so."

With his hand the boy beckoned to Madeiras to come down. "Keep low when you cross the tailin's," Johnny told him. "They'll git you from below if you ain't careful."

The boy thought, of course, that Tony had stolen away from Kent's camp to make his stand with the three of them. He knew he would have done the same thing had the tables been turned.

Imagine his surprise when he saw the Basque

kick the Indian's rifle over the edge of the dump and heard himself ordered to throw up his hands.

The order was heard down below. Men were watching. The Basque made no effort to keep out of sight.

Molly moaned as she saw how Johnny had been fooled by the treacherous Madeiras. Charlie Paul was crawling after his gun. Johnny for once in his life was speechless. He tried to lift his arms, but his muscles would not obey.

The Basque's gun was not more than three feet from Johnny's head. The two men were permitted a second in which to stare into each other's eyes.

The Basque said something. What was it? Madeiras was moving his lips. He was whispering to him, but so low that Molly, even as close as she was, did not hear. Johnny caught the words then. It was a command!

The next instant the Basque's gun roared. Johnny's arms went up convulsively. His body whirled, seemed to lose its balance, and for a second swayed crazily over the edge of the dump. Molly screamed and ran to catch him, but the

boy was gone. She could see him careening down the tailings, a trail of blood in his wake.

The weight of Johnny's body set the loose rock in motion. His fall had sent a small avalanche ahead of him, and now he rode upon a moving sea of quartz and feldspar.

The direction in which the rock was falling was away from the men below. Molly saw the almost impenetrable cañon toward which the body was dashing. She closed her eyes and turned away. But she could not shut from her ears the roaring of that grinding, splintering mass of rock.

Clouds of dust arose and hung over the lower cañon long after the noise had ceased.

Madeiras climbed out to the edge of the dump. It was twilight, but he could see the men below. They were running about, shouting, and waving their arms. Gallup and Kent and the sheriff were bunched together. The Basque shook his fist at them.

"There he ees, Gallup," he shouted. "You can come and get heem now!"

CHAPTER XX.

WITHOUT PAY.

"GIT him?" the crowd yelled. "We'll git you, you bosco—you white-livered whelp—you low-down, ornery—"

And they meant it, too!

"Git your rope, Stuffy," some one cried. "We'll give that hombre a ride."

Gallup and Kent glanced at Hobe. The big foreman's face was black with hatred. "Come on," they heard him grumble; "we're goin' up there."

"He only did what he was told to do," the sheriff hurried to explain. "I swore him in. He's within the law."

"Law?" Hobe's jaw looked dangerous. "Ain't no law that 'll let a man murder his pal. To hell with your law! We're goin' to git him!"

Roddy's face paled at the crowd's answer to

this statement. Kent, however, was less frightened.

"I'm tellin' you, boys," the old man cried. "Ain't no man workin' for me that touches that Basque. I wanted my girl. He got her for me."

"Well, I'm tellin' you, Kent," Hobe ground out, "it's either me or the Basque. We don't ride the same range after this."

There wasn't even the smallest bit of bluff about this. Kent realized it, too. He could ill afford to lose Hobe. "The Basque 'll go, then," he said grudgingly, "but I'll not see him hung."

"And what do you think he'd do to the girl if the crowd of you started up there?" Roddy inquired. "If he's what you think he is, he'd fix her."

"Let all of you stay back," Kent cried, elbowing his way to Gallup's side. "The two of us will go up. I want my girl, and I'll git her unharmed. What Roddy says is so. You're only makin' a damned nuisance out of yourself with this talk of hangin'. Come on, Gallup!"

For a moment Kent was master. He was again the tyrant of bygone days.

Madeiras was keenly alive to his danger. He had sent Charlie Paul on his way; Molly was heaping coals of fire upon the Basque's head; but the thing which held Tony's attention was that angry murmur from below. He recognized the sounds. He had seen men hanged!

With a sigh of relief he saw Gallup and Kent break from the crowd and start toward him. When they reached the upper side of the little flat the Basque called to them:

"You drop those gun before you come any closer!"

"I want my daughter!" Kent answered.

"Thass always right wit' me, *señor*; but those gun—they stay behin'."

"Humor the fool," Gallup cried, throwing his rifle into the sage. "We want the girl, and I want to see Dice's body."

Unarmed, therefore, they climbed to the entrance of the mine. Madeiras met them with a surly laugh.

"Where is she?" Kent demanded.

Tony pointed to a pile of blankets upon which

Molly lay sobbing. Kent knelt beside her, his bony fingers shaking as he caressed her hair.

"Come, Molly," he begged, "we'll git you home."

Molly turned from him angrily.

"Don't touch me," she cried. "Your hands are as red as that beast's there. I didn't believe you could stoop to this."

"Now, now," Kent pleaded, "you're all upset. I'll——"

"You'll do nothing for me!" Molly raised her hand and pointed at Gallup. "You two men may take me away from here; you may make me go to the ranch, and even marry me off; but you'll do it by force! Father—I think I despise you. I see now why you got Madeiras to come back. It was nicely worked out. Well, I know where I stand. I'm no longer the fool."

The girl was hysterical. The old man thought she would fall, so helplessly did she sway from side to side.

"My own father—my own flesh and blood," she sobbed. "That you could do this to me." And

with a lunge she threw herself toward the edge of the dump over which Johnny had pitched.

Kent caught her and drew her back, a dead weight in his arms.

"She's fainted," he gasped.

"Won't hurt her," Gallup assured him. "Here's horses; git her down to my rig and take her home. Put her to bed and see that she don't try nothin' foolish. I'm goin' down there." And he pointed to the spot where he expected to find Johnny's body. "You come along, Madeiras. We can git down there if we take our time."

"*Sí, I go; but I go alone. Señor, you are the coroner, not the sheriff. Why should I go weeth you?*"

"You know why," Aaron growled.

"I know no such theeng," Tony argued. "You geeve me five hundret dollar. I keel him like I promise. You ought be satisfied."

Kent's eyes opened.

"Yòu paid him to kill the boy?" the old man asked Aaron.

"Why not?" demanded Gallup. "We're done with him. I want to see just how damn'd dead he

is, though. Come on, Madeiras; you can't afford to break with me."

Tony laughed softly to himself. When Kent started downhill with Molly the Basque motioned to Gallup, and they set off, too. Tony's heart was heavy. He had overplayed his hand.

The long Nevada twilight was almost over by the time the two men reached the bottom of the little side cañon into which Johnny's body had shot.

"Here's the place," Gallup called. "Tons of rock came down. I don't see him, do you? Look around."

They searched for fifteen minutes—time enough, considering the place—without finding the body. Madeiras was wildly excited over this. "Mebbe those rock cover heem up, eh?" he suggested, white-lipped.

"Naw! Wasn't he ridin' on top of them?"

"Sí! But plenty rock come after him. No blood, no not'ing, here. When the moon come up I deeg in these rock."

"What's the use? If he's buried, he's dead enough. You can stay here if you want to; I'm

goin' back. And I'll trouble you to return that five hundred. I ain't payin' for a dead man unless I see the body."

"Thass so, *señor*?" the Basque inquired unpleasantly. He paused, then: "Thees place plenty beeg enough for two daid man."

He tossed his rifle in back of him, and with hands resting upon his hips, he faced Gallup.

Aaron felt a shiver pass through his body. The size of those hands froze his blood. He fancied he could feel them at his throat—tearing, strangling, forcing the breath from his old carcass.

Gallup's cunning did not fail him. He knew that the present was the time for quick thinking and smooth talking.

"Why are you so down on me?" he asked, apparently going off at a tangent.

"You ask that, *señor*?"

Madeiras' teeth showed white and even in the half light.

"That mortgage, eh? We can adjust that. Things can be arranged. Tobias oversteps himself now and then. But give me a little time; I'll fix that up. And now about the five hundred—

you keep it. You'll be goin' away, and you'll be needin' money." Aaron rubbed his hands. "Yes," he repeated, "you keep that money, Tony."

"No, *señor*," Tony said lightly. "You have made leetla mistak'. You tak' those money back. But you owe me somet'ing, of course. I keep *thees*."

Madeiras had been running his fingers through the contents of Gallup's purse and now held out for Aaron's inspection the little gold snake Crossbie Traynor had worn on his hat band.

Gallup shrank back, his jaws working nervously. The next second he was reaching for the little charm.

"No, *señor*," Tony warned. "I keep eet."

"I didn't know it was in there," Gallup shrieked. "It's mine! What in hell do you want with it?"

"Thass fonny t'ing why I want heem, *señor*. But since first time I see those leetla snake I t'ink mebbe I lak' to wear heem on my hat ban' some time."

"What're you talkin' about? I've owned that luck piece these forty years. Who'd you ever see wearin' it?"

Tony grinned again.

"Mebbe those man what brought eet back to you, *señor*. He say the man what own eet be sure recognize heem by that snake."

"What's that? What—what man?" Aaron babbled.

"Those man what keel himself, *señor*. Johnny Dice mebbe dead; but me—Tony Madeiras—ees steel here! You go now."

Aaron was in no position to dispute this.

Bent over, muttering strange words to himself, Gallup moved away, in his ears the mocking laughter of the Basque.

Tony kept his word with Johnny. As soon as the moon came up he set the *débris* in motion again. Tons and tons of small rock cascaded down upon the mass already piled in the choked cañon, but it failed to uncover the body of the boy.

It occurred to Madeiras, then, that Johnny might have crawled away some distance and be lying helpless further down the cañon. He called for the better part of ten minutes, but received no answer.

Johnny Dice was not to be found.

Hours later Gallup stumbled into Kent's camp. Only Roddy and Tobias and one or two others remained.

"You look as though you'd seen a ghost," the sheriff remarked. "What in God's name you been up to?"

"Terrible trip," Gallup moaned. "Too much for me."

"Ain't you goin' to hold an inquest?"

"Inquest, hell!" Aaron snorted. "The man's buried under a hundred ton of rock. The Basque was your deputy. That ends it as far as I'm concerned."

CHAPTER XXI.

TWO DEAD MEN.

FOR a dead man Johnny Dice was most active at that very moment. He was some five miles from the spot where Tony searched for his body. He was not alone. Some one else moved through the greasewood and sage ahead of him. Stealthily, too, Johnny felt. The two of them had been circling each other for some time. Both were anxious to avoid the other, but for this very reason, seemingly, their trails kept on crossing and recrossing.

It was uncanny. Johnny thought he was being tracked. By innumerable little deductions he knew that no animal made those sounds which alternately retreated and advanced behind and before him. It was a man! Who? The boy strained his eyes to catch sight of moving shadow or strange object.

He went unrewarded. It may have been that

he was less cautious than usual. His mind was still blurred from the Basque's shot. From the time Madeiras had appeared upon the tailings until the present moment, things had happened so quickly that Johnny could only grasp the essential facts.

The boy knew that Tony had whispered: "Play dead!" The Basque's every movement had been made to the gallery. The next instant his gun had flashed fire. Johnny's fall had not been acted. Madeiras had given him only a scalp wound, but the impact had been sufficient to send the boy off his balance. The ride down the moving tailings had torn Johnny's clothing to shreds, but had not so much as scratched his skin. The stunt under other circumstances would have been good sport.

He had regained consciousness there in the choked cañon. The Basque's words had come back to him: "Play dead!"

His wound, a trivial injury, had confirmed his faith in the fact that the shooting was a game. Madeiras was too handy with a gun to have missed at that distance! Something had happened at the ranch—something which would be uncov-

ered if certain parties thought him dead. It was plain enough to Johnny.

Feeling certain that soon some one would be searching for him, the boy had crawled over the loose rock and made his way down the cañon to where it opened on a high plateau.

There he had rested—and worried about Molly. What was to stop Gallup from marrying her now? Could he depend on Tony to prevent that? Surely the Basque would not have gone to this desperate measure unless he was prepared to protect the girl. The boy had to stand on something, and he chose to do it on this hypothesis. A sensible decision.

But Johnny proceeded to make a bad mistake. Believing as he did that Tony wanted the world to consider him dead he hoped to better accomplish the hoax by hiding from the Basque; never for a moment realizing that Madeiras on not finding the body would jump to the conclusion that Johnny was buried under the avalanche of rock.

The boy's first need was a horse. Being afoot in this country rendered him almost helpless. Kent

and his men would surely be watching for him, so Johnny had headed for the Reservation as his best refuge.

Half an hour back his trail had crossed that of the man out there in the blackness. It had stopped any further thought of Molly and Madeiras.

And now a very curious thing happened. A thud and the sound of crackling brush to his right made Johnny turn in that direction. As he did so some one whispered in back of him:

“Hands up!”

The other man had tossed a rock into the sage and the noise it made as it landed had claimed the boy's attention and left him an easy target.

“You turn him around now,” the voice said.

Johnny did as he was bid and found himself staring at Charlie Paul. The Indian's eyes bulged. “You him, Johnny?” he cried.

“Charlie Paul! You damn near scairt me to death.”

“You no dead?” the Indian asked.

“Not yet, Charlie. What happened?”

It took the Indian some time to satisfy the boy's curiosity.

"Gallup and Kent go 'way, eh?" Johnny questioned. "You sure?"

"Sure. Take horses, too. I watch; I see. All gone now."

Johnny pondered for some minutes over the Indian's information.

"Charlie Paul," he said at last. "I tell you somethin'. You try understand him, Charlie. Savvy?"

Charlie grunted his assent.

"Well," the boy began, "everybody think I'm dead—me. You no tell. The Basque, he good friend me. He not shoot for kill. Me and him play game, all same like *viente y uno*, you savvy? So! By and by I catch him man." Johnny indicated a rope around his neck. "You no talk, eh?"

"No talk, me."

"Good. I go back on mine. Plenty grub, plenty water there. You take him money. Mebbe you go Reservation; buy two horse. No tell Thunder Bird you buy him for me. You do that, Charlie Paul?"

"I go," said the Indian. "Mebbe so to-morrow night I be back."

Sundown the following day found Charlie back at the mine. Johnny had slept for hours, and soon after the Indian's arrival he determined to ride to the Diamond-Bar and let Molly know that he was not dead. He could depend on her to keep his secret. To withhold the truth from her was needless cruelty.

Johnny circled the house before he approached it. A dim light burned in Molly's room. Crawling to the side window he lay upon the ground listening for some sound which would tell him she was awake. Once or twice he fancied he heard a low sob or moan. Getting to his feet he fastened his hands on the sill above him and began drawing up his body so that he could see into the room.

His head and shoulders were even with the bottom of the window when a nail tore into his forearm. The pain of it forced a moan from his lips. It had a startling effect on the occupants of the room.

Molly was in bed; but not asleep. Old Kent sat beside her. Neither had been aware of the

boy's nearness until that mournful cry escaped his lips. They turned, mouths open, eyes wide.

The old man screamed as he saw Johnny. Pain and the dead weight of his body upon his arms had put a hideous expression on the boy's face. His clothes were ragged, his face white, his hair uncombed. The dim light threw shadows which only magnified his weirdness.

"Take him away! Take him away!" Kent screeched. "Don't you see him?" he wailed. "He's there—in the window. Aw-w-w!" And he covered his face with his hands to shut out the gruesome sight.

Without knowing that he did it, Johnny flung a beseeching hand toward Molly. A shriek answered him and he saw her topple over upon her bed. The men were running from the bunk-house. There was nothing left for the boy to do but go.

From the cover of the willows by the creek he could see men moving about with lanterns. Cries came to him, and above others, the sound of Kent yelling:

"A ghost, I tell yuh! He's come back to haunt me! Don't laugh at me! Don't laugh!" And

Kent's cry rose until it broke in a fit of choking.

"Take him inside," came an order in Hobe's voice. "He's babblin' like a child."

The old man fought them off as they tried to lift him.

"He's here!" he cried. "I heard him! Don't let him git me. Molly, Molly, I didn't do it. Gallup paid Madeiras to kill him. I swear I didn't do it. I swear——"

The old man's cries died away in a moan of anguish. The door banged and Johnny knew that they had taken him to his room.

A cold sweat broke out on Johnny. It had never occurred to him that this construction would be put on his appearance. Was it possible that this was the very thing Tony had had in mind when he shot him? The sight of him had frightened Kent out of his wits.

What would happen if he appeared before Gallup in the dead of night in similar fashion? Gallup had paid Madeiras to murder him.

Johnny cursed Gallup as he led his horse away from the ranch.

"Reckon I'll pay you a visit, Aaron," he said

to himself. "And right soon, too. I may be dead, but I'll put the fear of hell into your miserable old carcass. You'll be thinkin' of somethin' else besides who you are goin' to marry."

Johnny's one brief glance at Molly had shown him the girl tired, grief-stricken, hysterical. He wanted to tell her, now more than ever, that he lived; but to do so meant the loss of his best weapon against Kent and Gallup. Better for her to suffer now than to be forced into marrying Aaron Gallup.

Thoughts of Crosbie Traynor came to Johnny as he rode along. What had old Thunder Bird found out? The chief would have something to say when next they met.

"Strikes me we got quite a lot in common, Crosbie Traynor," mused Johnny. "The world's got both of us figured for dead. Only I'm alive to avenge myself."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FACE IN THE WINDOW.

JOHNNY surprised Charlie Paul on the following day by telling him that they were going to Standing Rock.

"Me still dead man," the boy said in answer to the question in the Indian's eyes. "We stop this side the Rock. Nobody there know I be in your camp. Mebbe so, come night time, we go into town, play ghost, mebbe scare some man, eh?"

Charlie grinned and shook his head. "Ah, nah," he said, "me no ghost."

"I be the ghost, Charlie," Johnny told him. "Gallup paid Tony to git me. I'm goin' to play dead now. You go down and git the horses. I be ready pretty quick."

This talk of ghosts was "bad medicine" in Charlie's eyes, but he agreed, nevertheless, to do as the boy ordered.

The two traveled far from any road, and so slow was their progress that night found them still some miles from town.

Low hills came close to the northern limits of Standing Rock. The Indian knew a spot among them where he decided to camp. It was a little after nine o'clock before they reached it.

"Leave our stuff here, Charlie," Johnny advised. "We eat, then we go see Gallup."

The Indian answered with a shrug of his shoulders. He favored more direct action than this business of playing ghost. His way, under the circumstances, would have been to pot Aaron as he slept.

Johnny thumbed his gun just as they were ready to leave. Charlie smiled at this. Maybe the night held something of interest, after all.

"Ghost no have gun," he laughed mockingly.

"No," Johnny chuckled. "All the same I take him. You watch sharp till we cross railroad."

He knew that once across the tracks they would be in little danger of being seen. Gallup's house was one of the few on that side of the Espee main line.

When they had left the railroad a hundred yards behind they dismounted and began walking through the sage toward Aaron's place. The three or four cabins they had to pass to get there were in darkness. A light burned in an upper window of Gallup's house.

"Tobias and him countin' up the day's profits, no doubt," Johnny thought. The Indian heard the boy muttering. "'Bout time I begun doin' a little countin' up myself," Johnny went on. Aloud, then, to Charlie he said:

"You git ahead now. No noise, no tracks, you savvy?"

Again the Indian answered with a nod of his head.

In ten minutes they were lurking in the shadows beneath the lighted window.

Aaron's house was a story and a half affair, and the lighted window at least ten feet from the ground. They could hear the murmur of voices, but the closed window kept them from understanding a word of what was being said.

A stone's throw away the lights of the Palace Hotel burned brightly; Johnny turned a wistful

eye toward it. In a way it was his Times Square—his Broadway. He wondered who was facing Scanlon to-night. Something whispered to him that his evenings there were a thing of the past. Gambling with him had been an art, but it was a sorry accomplishment, one that would be of doubtful value to him in the days to come.

Unknown to Johnny, this reasoning was based on the fact that subconsciously he saw himself treading the future at Molly Kent's side.

A through freight thundered by as the two men waited, undecided as to their next move. Charlie looked blankly at the boy. "How you get up there?" he whispered.

"I'll tell you," Johnny answered, an idea breaking in on him. "I stand on your shoulders, Charlie, you know, like this"—the boy stooped and then arose, clasping the legs of an imaginary man. "You understand?"

Again that unemotional nod from the Indian. Getting down upon all fours, he waited for Johnny to climb into position. The boy straightened up, using the side of the house to help him retain his balance.

"Move along," he whispered. "Stop when I signal."

They had only ten feet to go. Charlie felt Johnny's legs stiffen as the boy came abreast the window. The Indian stopped.

"Steady," Johnny warned as he pressed his face to the glass. He started as he beheld Gallup's companion. It was Tony Madeiras!

The Basque seemed to be having the best of the conversation. Tony had his hat on, pushed back from his forehead, his black hair curling out from beneath the brim. Something strange about the hat caught and held Johnny's attention. It was the little gold snake snapped in the hat band.

"Traynor's luck piece or I'm a liar," Johnny gasped to himself. "Where in God's name did the Basque git it?"

He could see that Tony was enjoying himself. He knew Madeiras' manner when things were going his way. A smile all insolence wreathed the man's face. His eyes were contemplative, cruel. Gallup cowered before them.

There was money upon the table between the

two men. The Basque pushed the gold pieces to the floor with a sweep of his hand.

"Money mean not'ing to Tony Madeiras," Johnny heard him say. "Thass leetla theeng—money. You tell me 'bout those jail at Carson. Ha, ha! Those jail be nice place for you, too, *señor*."

"Don't be a fool, Madeiras," old Aaron whined. "You can't send me down there without goin' yourself."

"I go eef I have to. I'm strong; jail ees no nice place for old man like you. Me, I do not try to keel Johnny. I just crease him, I t'ink. Those rock, they keel him; but judge, he say we keel him just the same, I guess. Now what you say—you steel try marry those girl?"

Aaron did not answer.

"As sure you try those trick," Tony went on, "I go see the Señor Kelsey"—the district attorney.

"You will, eh?" Gallup cried. "Like hell you will!"

His hand came up from under the table, a pistol, black and ominous, held rigidly. "You'll

tell nothin'!" he screamed as he leveled his gun at the Basque's head.

A blood-curdling yell broke from Johnny's lips as he saw the old man's finger tighten on the trigger. Gallup jumped. His chair crashed over as he kicked it out of his way. The Basque's eyes rolled until their whites showed.

What was that in the window—a dead man's face?

"*Hola! Virgen santa!*" Madeiras shouted, and he made the sign of the cross. "Johnny! Johnny Dice!"

Gallup's palsied hand pointed his gun at the apparition. Johnny contorted his face and laughed diabolically. The old man's finger pressed the trigger and shot the window pane to bits, but the boy was gone. He had beaten the gun by an instant.

Charlie Paul had felt the boy's legs stiffen. The next he knew Johnny was on the ground beside him. A moment later they were lost in the night.

When they found their ponies the boy permitted himself his first laugh. "That yell of mine," he

said, "wasn't in the play. No, sir! Madeiras was up there. Gallup would have killed him in another second."

"Good old Tony," thought Johnny. Molly was safe! Madeiras was a hero. He was making a Judas of himself for his pal's sake.

"Guess we don't go back there pretty soon, eh?" Charlie chuckled.

"Surest thing!" exclaimed Johnny. "I know now that he'll scare. We have plenty fun along that man, Charlie."

Madeiras had discovered as much, too. Even seeing the ghost of Johnny Dice had not robbed him of all sense. When Gallup turned back from the shattered window he found himself looking into the Basque's gun.

"I tak' those peestol now, *señor*," he said.

Aaron was too dumfounded to object. "Did yuh see it?" he demanded. "It was him!"

"*Madre de Dios!* Of course I see heem," the Basque cried angrily. His hands flashed out and caught Gallup. Lifting him off his feet he hurled him across the room.

"I ought to keel you!" he growled.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE GUN SPEAKS.

THE following morning found Kent in Standing Rock closeted with Gallup. Kent was a nervous wreck. Molly had refused to speak to him; his men were sullen, aloof; Tobias had been back about the notes, and to top it all the specter of Johnny Dice walked beside him wherever he went.

"You been seein' ghosts, too?" Aaron asked.

"You know, then, eh?" old Jackson answered miserably. "I saw him as plain as I'm seein' you, Gallup. The girl did, too. I'll never forget how it moaned. I used to laugh at men who believed in haunts." Kent shook his head. "I'm past doin' that now. When did you see it?"

"Last night. It was here—but it ain't no haunt. It's Dice himself! I found footprints beneath the window this mornin'. Let him come ag'in. I won't miss him a second time."

"You mean he's alive—that he ain't killed?"

"You've got it! I knew you couldn't figger him dead unless you'd seen his body put in the ground. He's fooled us all, even the Basque. Madeiras was here last night threatenin' me. Told me he'd put me in Carson Penitentiary if I tried to marry Molly."

"I was hopin' you'd change your mind about that, Gallup. The girl's half mad."

"Well, you weren't able to do anythin' for Tobias yesterday. I'll wait 'till day after to-morrow. You pay the money or I take the girl. She ain't got no use for you, nohow. A man's got to have a little backbone if he wants to keep his head up with wimmen. As soon as she pulled Traynor's name on you, you wilted. I don't know how much Dice knows, but it's too much. Madeiras is makin' big talk, too. The damn bosco stole that old Moqui charm of mine. He knew who had it, too."

"What?" Kent's mouth twitched. He shook his fist in Gallup's face. "How'd he know that?" he cried.

"That scares you, does it? Let him prove what he——" Gallup stopped short, his eyes on the

door to the adjoining room. He had seen it move! He knew that he had closed it when Kent came in. Pushing his visitor out of the way, Aaron made a leap for the door and threw it open. Tobias was caught flat-footed.

Gallup grabbed the man by his coat and dragged him into the room. "Eavesdroppin', eh?" Aaron screamed. "I'll teach you to spy on me. You're through—fired! You ain't got a cent but what you got from me. You pussyfootin' swine, what were you hopin' to hear! Take *that!*"

Tobias Gale fairly bristled as he got up from the floor. So wrathful was he that his little body trembled from head to foot. For years he had suppressed his emotions, bridled his desires, made a machine of himself. Gallup marveled as he gazed at him now.

"Let us be honest for once, Aaron Gallup," Tobias said with fine impudence. "When the pot calls the kettle black it's time to tell the truth. What I've got is mine. I earned it doing your dirty bidding.

"You'll not kick me out. I've protected myself. Indeed I have. You'll find that out when you try

to call in some of your loans. Humph! A swine am I, eh? You are the swine, Aaron Gallup.

"I know why you wanted Johnny Dice put out of the way, and I know that Crosbie Traynor didn't kill himself. You know it, too! You'll crawl to me before I've finished. You just try to kick me out, to cheat me—and I'll tell what's what.

"You've kicked and beat me for years. You thought I didn't mind. Well, I've made it my business to find out about you. You start your little tricks, and Molly Kent will know, and Johnny Dice will know. I'll talk you so deep into jail that the Carson Penitentiary will crumble to ruins before they let you out."

Tobias hurled a chair from his path.

"Get out of my way!" he warned Gallup. "I'm leaving this house now forever. When you've got something to say to me you can come to the hotel and find me."

And the slave marched out, the king at last!

Kent and Gallup sat and stared at each other for countless minutes. Crushed, dumfounded, Kent reached for his hat finally and without a

word stumbled down the stairs to get into his rig and start for home.

Gallup seemed unaware of his going. Meal time came, but Aaron still sat in his upstairs room, fixedly gazing into space. Some one knocked at his door, but he heard it not. His brain refused to hold any thought other than that Johnny Dice lived and would have the truth from Tobias.

Aaron's gun lay upon the table before him. As he continued to sit in his trancelike state the pistol began to claim his attention. In fact, Gallup fancied it talking to him.

"You've lived by the gun," the weapon seemed to say. "I've seen you through every big crisis of your life. I do my work well when properly handled. I stop babbling tongues; smother secrets; give the old the strength of the young. I am your friend, Aaron Gallup. Men whom you have trusted have failed you or else they have been clumsy, stupid—in me alone can you place dependence."

Yes, it was plain, Johnny Dice had to die. Tobias and Madeiras were dangerous—they could be attended to later, but Johnny Dice's end was im-

perative. He had to go. But how? It had to be soon—before the boy talked with the other two. That meant to-night! Johnny Dice would have to die to-night!

Gallup began to shake off his lethargy. Between now and sundown he had to be ready.

He went downstairs and puttered over his stove preparing food. Color flowed back into his face as his brain began to function again. He mumbled to himself as he settled on what he would do. Gallup's vanity took much pleasure from the proposed plan. It was simple, but ripe with the native ingenuity which had brought Aaron across many a rough spot.

In brief, it was this: no one but Tobias Gale and Jackson Kent knew that he had seen through Johnny's game. The boy had first appeared to Kent and then to him. That argued that Johnny would be hiding out—anxious to keep alive the story of his death.

Last night the boy's ghostly visit had been more than a success. Now, if he, Gallup, spread the story of what he had seen—the grinning face, the fiendish cry—wouldn't word of his talking

reach Johnny? The man must have some confederate who would carry the tale.

But supposing that failed, if men heard the coroner talking of having seen a ghost, and this very night that ghost should return and be killed, and proved no ghost at all—well, wouldn't that be alibi enough? Yet the law couldn't touch Gallup for that.

So, then, it got down to whether Johnny would return. Aaron was satisfied to believe that he would, so between then and sunset he spread his story up and down the main street of Standing Rock.

Charlie Paul, loafing in front of the Palace Hotel, heard it and carried it to Johnny.

"He look sick, Gallup," the Indian went on. "He pretty damn well scared, him."

"Guess Aaron knows haunts is hostile to him," Johnny said more to himself than to Charlie.

"Him—Gallup—have big fight, too," the faithful Indian added.

"What fight? No savvy that, Charlie."

"Man, Gale—all bus' up."

"Split—all off, you mean?"

"Him split," Charlie grinned. "Him, Gale, live um hotel."

"Well, I'm damned!" Johnny dropped the frying pan to better voice his surprise. "Them two old junipers fallin' out—now what do you know 'bout that? You hear any more, Charlie?"

"Nah. Gale get horse, he drive away."

"There's a kittle of fish for you!" Johnny shook his head uncomprehendingly. "I should admire to know what's up. Mebbe so we find out to-night."

Unknown to Johnny, Tobias Gale had returned to Standing Rock shortly after sundown. He had not been alone when he reached the outskirts of the town. There he had stopped, and the man who occupied the rig with him had stepped to the ground. Gale had driven on, and the other man, after ten minutes, had started to walk the remaining distance into the Rock.

Tobias made no effort to see him again, but he was apparently well satisfied with his day's work. The man with whom he had driven across country that afternoon could be expected to furnish rare entertainment for one Gallup.

Gale made some discreet, but futile, inquiries regarding the whereabouts of Tony Madeiras and retired to his room. This was Gallup's night, and Tobias was in no way inclined to share the spotlight with him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

JOHNNY DICE COMES BACK TO LIFE.

WHEN Aaron Gallup retired to his home at seven o'clock that evening he knew that if Johnny Dice hovered in or near Standing Rock he had heard by now the story of his—Gallup's—supernatural visitor. Figuratively speaking, Aaron patted himself on the back for having set his trap for the smooth Johnny. The old man's confidence in his scheme was such that he even whistled snatches of an old tune popular in the days of the Sante Fe Trail.

He finished his supper without lighting a lamp. Having eaten, he climbed the stairs and made ready for the expected visitor. He saw to it that his gun was in order; he lighted a lamp; he raised the curtains—it was as if he were a stage manager preparing for the evening's show.

When his old brain refused to suggest any additional bit of stagecraft, Aaron took his seat.

He had arranged the lamp so that he sat in shadow. Four or five times he drew a bead upon an imaginary face in the window—it made him smile. He was ready—he wouldn't miss to-night.

It was too early for ghosts, so he half dozed in his chair. A clock struck eight, but Aaron heard it not, nor did he catch the soft *pad-pad* of naked feet ascending the stairs. Gallup was in a strange world confronting a horde of Johnny Dices. He shot them down, one after another, until his trigger finger grew tired.

Minutes slipped by as the old man sat lost in reverie, a smile of satisfaction upon his face. The door had opened noiselessly, a bony hand forcing it inward. The visitor squinted his eyes at Gallup and took a step into the room, closing the door behind him as he did so. He stood still, waiting for the other to catch sight of him.

Aaron became aware of the man's presence by degrees. When he saw him and recognition followed, he uttered no word of surprise or fear, but just stared and stared at him. And eyes as cold as his own stared back at him.

This specter out of the past was no ghost, and

yet it well might have been, for if, in appearance, there was ever a living dead man it was this gaunt visitor.

Gallup's thoughts were no longer on the window. Johnny Dice no longer obsessed him. He knew there could be no connection between the boy and this shriveled shadow of a man confronting him.

And yet there was, and not so remote at that. But Johnny knew nothing of the man's coming. The boy was playing a lone hand this night. He had already circled Gallup's house several times. That a light should be burning in that same room again to-night looked suspicious to Johnny. It said all too plainly that he was expected.

Well, it is a poor general who has only one plan of attack. Johnny flattered himself that he was equal to this occasion.

The eastern freight had not pulled in yet. Two carloads of ore from the Black Prince mine stood upon the side track. They would have to be picked up and cut into the train. Very likely the freight would bring a car of merchandise from San Francisco for the Rock. That would take more

time. Cars would be switched back and forth past the house. One should be able to see into that lighted upper story room from the top of one of those cars.

Gallup had not replaced the shattered glass as yet. With fair skill a man should be able to flip a piece of cardboard into the room. Johnny had such a thing to toss at Gallup's feet—the picture of Molly which he had found in Traynor's wallet.

The boy had the best of reasons for doing this. Surely if Gallup did not recognize the picture it would worry him sore just because he could not place the child's face. A picture, delivered as this one would be, carried a message, a warning. And perhaps the man would fail to reason that it had been tossed into the room from the top of a passing freight car. If so, he would be at some pains to figure how it came there upon his floor.

If the incident produced no other effect than this, Johnny told himself he would be satisfied. It would be another straw added to Aaron's load, and to break and unnerve the man was Johnny's game.

But he stood to win more than this. He had

made Kent admit that he had known Crosbie Traynor. If Gallup recognized that picture it was proof enough that he, too, had known the man. Then, Johnny felt that he would have discovered the reason for Kent's subservience to Gallup.

As he walked the tracks to the head of the switch just this side of the shipping pens he told himself that he could not lose. No matter how the play went, he won.

The freight pulled in half an hour late, but Johnny's calculation in regard to the amount of work the train crew would have to do proved correct. Swinging up to the top of one of the big box cars he stretched himself flat and waited for the switching to begin. In a few minutes he was rolling past Gallup's house.

Rising to his knees, the picture in his hand, he peered into the lighted room. What he saw there drove his plans far from his mind. In fact, so great was Johnny's surprise that he had trouble in retaining his balance upon the moving car.

Gallup's visitor was old Thunder Bird! Yes—and the old chief was bound and gagged! Gallup

sat before him. Another second and the scene was whisked from Johnny's vision.

Johnny's breath came in gasps as he rode down the tracks. Some things were plain now. It was Thunder Bird himself whom Traynor had gone to see! Could there be any doubt of it? Gallup saw an enemy in the Indian. Why? What better reason would he want than that Thunder Bird had known Traynor, and that the old chief knew that he—Gallup—had known the man, too?

People had called Traynor a stranger, but here were three men—Thunder Bird, Kent, and Gallup—whose actions proved that they had known him. There might be others—Tobias Gale, for instance—he was a mysterious sort of person. Indeed, no stranger's bullet had ended Traynor's life.

Johnny fretted and fumed as the minutes passed while the car stood still. It seemed that hours dragged by before the engine came back to shunt the car down the tracks toward town. Finally it began to move. The boy felt it take the switch just before it crossed the main street of the town. By this he knew that the car was going on to the

siding which managed to squeeze past the side of the hotel.

Although not so close to Gallup's house now, the boy could see into the room by standing erect. The car came to a stop almost opposite it. Johnny saw Thunder Bird tied in his chair, but Gallup was gone. "Downstairs, no doubt," mused Johnny, "lookin' for me."

For the ten minutes that the car stood on the siding Johnny stared into the lighted room. He did not know just what to do. Rescuing men from Gallup's lair was hardly a thing to be pursued as a nightly vocation—that is, if one were at all fond of living. But on the other hand, Thunder Bird might hold the key to the entire situation. Johnny felt that the old chief could explain many things if he could be induced to talk.

Obviously the thing to do was to find Madeiras and then force a way into Gallup's house. Tony must be in town. Finding the Basque could not be more than an hour's work.

"Damn it," Johnny muttered. "Wish I'd tipped him off to the truth. Hain't helped a bit to let him think he killed me. I sure need him

now. Charlie wouldn't be no good at all. He'd want to stick a knife into Gallup."

The engine kicked a string of cars against the one upon which Johnny stood. They hit so sharply that the boy's legs almost went out from under him. Crawling to the hand irons he swung his foot out to find the top one. He was facing the hotel for the first time. Before him was the room in which Traynor had been killed. Johnny drew back his foot, his brain reeling as he began putting two and two together.

Once he stretched out his arm and touched the window sill.

"My God," he moaned, "this is *it*! It couldn't be anythin' else. It was this time of the night—the noise of the engine to kill the sound of the shot, a stick to lift the man's gun, a toss of the arm to throw it back into the room after the killin'—it's right as day! Why, of course—Traynor's hat was damp. It was rainin' that night. When whoever pulled it out to rip the band off, the rain got at it. And the wool—I picked up a piece of fleece from the floor. Teixarra was shippin' wool

that day. His cars stood right here. Mister, you've got the answer!"

Johnny mopped his face with his hands.

"Bumped him off with his own gun, too," he muttered. "Right clever, that. Yes, sir, this was one of the most clever murders this State can boast of. I got to talk to somebody or bust. I'm goin' to find Madeiras."

The car was moving away as Johnny swung to the ground. Half running, he burst into the Palace barroom. Scanlon dropped his cards as he caught sight of him.

Vinnie shouted: "My God, you dead, Johnny?"

"Dead, hell!" Johnny roared. "Do I look like a dead one? Where's Madeiras?"

"He ain't been here," Scanlon answered.

"He was in town last night," the boy exclaimed.

"He ain't far off right now. If you see him tell him I'm lookin' for him—to come on the run!"

Turning on his heel, Johnny flung himself through the door, deaf to the questions in Scanlon's eyes.

Vinnie stared at his partner. The other men present likewise looked at one another. What

had happened? Where had Johnny been? Gallup had seen his ghost, eh? The laugh was on Aaron.

"He's rearin' right up for a ghost, ain't he?" Scanlon declared.

"Sumthin' goin' to happen right soon, now," somebody stated. "I ain't never seen Johnny so hostile."

"That's too bad," Scanlon muttered. "Trouble comin'—and Doc Ritter forty miles away. They ain't no advantages in this town!"

CHAPTER XXV.

MADEIRAS ASSERTS HIMSELF.

JOHNNY combed the town without finding the Basque. No one would even admit that they had seen him. The boy refused to give up. Madeiras was there, somewhere, and he intended to find him. It was wasted effort, Tony having left the Rock as Johnny crouched upon the freight car.

The day had been one of misery for the Basque. He believed that he had killed Johnny. He was hardly less certain about having seen the boy's ghost. He was primitive and superstitious enough, too, to accept the fact that a dead man's spirit could return to haunt its enemies.

Tony had promised himself that Gallup should never get Molly. For this reason he slept in Brackett's stable. Aaron kept his rig there. If he set out for the Diamond-Bar, Madeiras would know it.

The Basque, brooding all day long over

Johnny's death, found the fact that he was keeping Gallup from Molly small recompense for the loss of the body. More than once the Basque wished that he had killed the coroner. He told himself that he would have to do it some day. Gallup would have to pay his debt.

Tony had managed to secure more than enough to drink during the last day or two. He had been half intoxicated when Gallup had entered the stables an hour back and hitched up his team. Soon after the old man had left, the Basque slid down from his nest in the hay mow.

"*Por Dios!*" he cursed. "So he go after all, eh? Better I tak' her than heem. I say, sometime I keel that man—to-night be the time!"

Madeiras had left his horse with an uncle at the *Casa Español*. The animal was under lock and key when Tony got there. Half an hour was wasted in awakening Felipe and unlocking the barn.

But at last the Basque set sail for the Diamond-Bar. He raked his pony with the spurs as he urged him on. Gallup could not be far ahead.

The ride began to sober him and he wondered how Gallup had come so far.

Miles unwound until the Basque had covered half the distance to the ranch. He had yet to catch a glimpse of Aaron. After another mile Madeiras pulled up his horse.

"Where I mees that man?" he asked himself. "I come fas'—no team keep ahead of me." He snapped his fingers at a sudden thought. "Mebbe he leave those team behin' while I was'e all that time wit' ole Felipe, and some mens tak' him in those dam' flivver."

Madeiras uttered a wild cry as he caught sight of the ranch. He was breaking all records to-night.

Not until he was within a quarter of a mile of the house did he bring his horse to a canter. A hundred yards more and he vaulted to the ground. Gun in hand, he left the pony and went crawling away through the sage. Passing to the rear of the house and finding the door unlocked, he stepped inside.

Madeiras knew the place too well to need a guide to lead him to the girl's room. Not a light

was burning. If Gallup had been here he was gone now. The thought made the Basque less cautious. His spur chains tinkled as he hurried to Molly's door. It was locked. Molly heard him tapping for admission.

"Who is it?" she demanded, frightened.

"Quick!" Tony whispered. "It's Madeiras. Gallup ees comin' to tak' you. Open the door!"

"I will not!" came the girl's voice, strong, defiant. "Go at once or I'll scream."

"Scream!" the Basque dared her as he put his shoulder to the door and snapped the lock. "You come wit' me."

A wave of emotion smote Madeiras as he sprang into the room. Molly had lighted a lamp. He saw her crouching against the bed, her night-gown open at the throat and half revealing the swelling bosom, the tapering limbs. The fragrance of her pink and white loveliness intoxicated the Basque. No wonder that Gallup wanted her. No wonder that Johnny had.

Molly had never been anything more than a tomboy to the Basque. He saw her now for a flesh-and-blood goddess.

The girl read his look and opened her mouth to cry out. The Basque saw her start and he leaped toward her. Molly struggled as his hand closed over her mouth.

"Don't you yell," he warned her. "You t'ink I'm pretty bad frien', eh? Some day, mebbe, you change your min'. I tak' you now. You go wit' me! What I care for Kent? What I care for Gallup? I keel my bes' frien'; but *Madre de Dios*, I die for you!"

Molly beat his hands and scratched his face, but a kitten would not have been more helpless against the strength of him. She felt herself lifted into his arms. With one hand Madeiras snatched up a pile of clothing. The next instant he was striding down the hall, carrying her as if she were no weight at all.

A hundred yards from the house the Basque turned, and shaking his fist at it he cried:

"By God, for once Tony Madeiras ees the boss!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

BETWEEN THE LINES.

OLD Aaron had no intention of going to the Diamond-Bar when he drove away from Brackett's stable. If the Basque had followed him for a block of two he would have known as much because Gallup turned his team from the main road and pulled up before his own house.

Johnny was standing in front of the hotel at the time and he promptly surmised the reason for Aaron's use of his team. The boy had about given up any hope of finding Madeiras. The appearance of Gallup made him decide to act alone.

"Sure as you're born," he said to himself, "that old crook is goin' to take Thunder Bird out in the brush and pump lead into him. I bet I'll have somethin' to say about that."

When Johnny crept around to the front of the house he saw that he was not mistaken. The old chief, bound and gagged, sat disconsolately in the

rig. Aaron had gone back upstairs. The boy could hear him closing a door.

"Here's where I take it on the run," Johnny told himself. A minute later he was in the buckboard beside the Indian. Grabbing the reins and giving the horses the gad took only a second.

When Gallup came out the team was gone. He cursed and ranted, but Johnny and Thunder Bird were beyond the sound of his rage.

A mile out of town the boy brought the team to a halt. Thunder Bird's eyes expressed no surprise. When Johnny had untied him and removed the gag from his mouth the chief made no attempt to speak.

"Men come soon, chief," Johnny said, thoroughly provoked at the other's reticence. "You make talk pretty quick."

Thunder Bird shook his head slowly. "No talk, me," he mumbled.

"No?" Johnny exclaimed hotly. "Mebbe so you change um mind. All the same I not come, Gallup kill you."

A sound, almost a laugh, broke from Thunder

Bird's lips. "I think—me—mebbe so you come. I see you on top train."

Johnny disregarded the Indian's words.

"Chief," he said, "many, many years you not come to white man's town. Why you come to-night?"

"No tell him that?"

"Gallup old friend with you, eh? You come, he tie you up—why you let him do that?"

Thunder Bird's chin was resting upon his chest. "*Huy!*" he grunted. "Too old, me—too old."

Johnny was not getting anywhere. "Chief," he drawled, unpleasantly, "it was you that Traynor came to see."

Thunder Bird turned his shrewd old eyes on the boy. "Mebbe," he answered.

It was admission enough.

"So," Johnny continued, "you know who kill him, too, eh?"

The Indian did not answer at once. When he did, he surprised the boy.

"Mebbe me." A soft, mocking laugh followed.

Johnny stared at him. "No," he said at last. "No—no! He come on Reservation—he come

away from Reservation. You no kill him. White man kill him." Johnny tapped his chest. "Me, I know how"—pointing to the chief—"you know why. Traynor no fool. He watch. Man catch him when he sleep. If you not tell me his name, chief, easy me, I find out who brung you to town. Mebbe that man talk. Lots of men talk by and by. You talk now, eh?"

Thunder Bird shook his head determinedly. "No talk, me. You wait—two, t'ree day you find out."

It was an artful answer. Johnny understood the cunning insinuation it carried. A muttered "Humph!" escaped him. "You mean, chief, that in two or three days somebody 'll find a man with a bullet hole clean through him or with a knife stuck in his back, and he'll be the man that killed Traynor. I savvy your talk, but it don't go. Dead men don't talk. No talk, no good."

"Man talk, jail catch um."

This observation gave Johnny renewed hope. "You talk now," he said, "law catch um man, no catch um you. No talk now, mebbe so law catch um you by and by."

Thunder Bird was unmoved. "No," he murmured. "Law no catch um me. Law no good for Indian—nothing no good for Indian. Piute make his own medicine."

"Sometime Piute medicine is bad. No good all time," Johnny argued. "I make good medicine for you, all the same you tell me."

Thunder Bird would not unbend. Again and again Johnny tried to make him speak. The boy's patience gave out in the end. He knew that in ten minutes the old Indian could clear up the mystery of Traynor's death if he would. But, no; his dignity as a chief had been assailed, and Thunder Bird was going to avenge the wrong in his own way. He couldn't have said it any plainer. And the prospective victim—— Who else but old Aaron?

There could be no doubt of it. Johnny was satisfied that the chief was pointing to Gallup as the murderer of Crosbie Traynor. But the Indian had not made a single statement that could be used as evidence to convict the coroner. His words were all innuendo. A man had to make his own conclusions.

Johnny knew from experience that threats were idle with Thunder Bird. He would talk when it pleased him to do so, and not before. Jumping to the ground he said sharply:

“Chief, you take the team; you go Reservation. I watch Gallup. Best you no come back. If you see Madeiras tell him I want him come quick. You fan it now if you want to get back before daylight.”

Johnny trudged to town as the chief drove away. He felt defeated, held off when success was almost within his grasp. Perhaps the wish was father to the thought, but it was easy for him to believe that Gallup had killed Traynor. He reconstructed the happenings of that tragic night on which they had found the man's body. He even recalled some of Gallup's conversation. Viewed, as the boy was doing now, it was incriminating.

But what of Kent? The evidence had pointed to him from the start. There were certain facts which were unalterable even now, but if Traynor had been killed in the manner Johnny believed, Kent could not have done it. Hobe had seen him

playing cards with Doc Ritter at the very time the crime must have been committed.

“And yet,” the boy thought, “Gallup’s got somethin’ on Kent. Absolutely yes!—and he’s got him hard. Every guess I’ve got is weak some place, even the one about the Indian. If the chief was Traynor’s friend, and Traynor was tryin’ to square up an old debt, why did Thunder Bird let the man come into the Rock? The Indian must have known that Kent was shippin’ from here. And if he didn’t he knew damn well that Gallup was here.

“Mebbe there was somebody else, too; but the chief would have knowed. Ain’t likely he’d ‘a’ sent a friend up against a stacked deck. And now that old devil is out to git Gallup. Sure as he does I’m licked, I’m a bust—a relic. On circumstantial evidence I could send two or three men to jail, but on the real goods I couldn’t indict a jackass.”

It was after midnight when Johnny got back to the hotel. Scanlon’s game was still active. Johnny recognized his fellow players—the two Faulkner brothers and Tris Bowles. The Faulkners had been freighting supplies to the Agency.

"Say, Charlie," Johnny asked the elder of the two, "you didn't come in from the Valley to-day, did yuh?"

"Yeah. Got in 'bout nine o'clock."

"That so?" Johnny asked, better pleased with himself than he had been for the last two hours. "Road's pretty fair, I guess," he ran on. "See anybody?"

"No, not until we got just outside of town. That human grub worm, Tobias Gale, passed us this side of the big hill."

"Seein' him wasn't seein' anybody."

"Them's my sentiments," the younger Tris announced. "He's got down to doin' Injuns out of their bit now. Had the old chief himself with him to-day."

Johnny Dice immediately lost all interest in the Messrs. Faulkner and Bowles. Singling out Vinnie, he said to him:

"I got to wake up Tobias for a minute. We got some most important business to transact. What room did you say he was in?"

"Now, Johnny," Vin warned, "those man ees

just come to leeve in thees 'otel. He's goot pay. You mak' no hell now."

"Say, you quit scoldin' me, Vinnie," Johnny laughed. "You don't know me; I've reformed. Why the sound of a gun would frighten me to death."

Vinnie grinned. Johnny Dice could have had the shirt from his back if he had asked for it.

For all of his talk Johnny felt of his gun before he knocked on Tobias' door. He got no answer, and after waiting a decent interval he tried the door. It was unlocked. Stepping into the room he struck a match and held it aloft.

"I'm damned," he exclaimed. "He's gone! What can that bird be up to this time of the night? He's strictly a to-bed-with-the-chickens sort of a person. Went out the back way, too, or Vin would 'a' seen him."

Johnny was not long in deciding on what he would do. Going to the bed he sat down and pulled off his boots.

"I'm goin' to camp right here," he said aloud. "When little Tobias comes back we're goin' to make medicine."

CHAPTER XXVII.

TIME TO ACT.

THE room was bathed in sunlight when Johnny Dice felt some one prodding him back to consciousness. Vinnie the Basque stood over him, his eyes wild with excitement.

"*Dios mio*, Johnny!" the man cried. "How you come here all night? What you do weeth those man Gale?"

"Search me," Johnny answered with a yawn. "Did I roost here all night?"

"How I know that? You come up here last night."

"Sure! Gale wasn't here. I took off my boots and lay down to wait for him. Guess he didn't come back."

"You not hurt heem, eh?" Vin inquired anxiously.

"'Course not. I'm too anxious to talk to him to hurt him."

"Well, plenty trouble come now," the Basque said sadly. "Roddy, Gallup, and Kent ees just go 'way. They look for you. Sheriff, hee's got warrant for you, Johnny."

"What?" Johnny pulled on his boots with a savage tug. "What's he after me for?"

"Kent say hees daughter ees gone; that you stole her."

"For the love of God!" the boy cried, his face paling. "It's a lie. I was here at midnight. I couldn't 'a' got to the ranch and back since then unless I'd had wings. Just what did Kent say?"

"Say the girl ees gone; room all mussed up; tracks outside the door."

"I can't believe it, Vin. It's a trap to git me. If Molly's gone, they took her themselves. Where is Madeiras? I counted on him to look after her."

Vin shook his head as he saw Johnny lash himself into a rage.

"If Gallup is back of this I'll bust him. Ain't they tryin' to find the girl?"

"*Sí!* Gallup say she be weeth you. Eef they fin' you, they fin' her. They come here look for

you. They try fin' your horse, too. Horse ees gone, so they think you gone."

"Where they headin' for?"

"Elk Valley. Those Faulkner boy say you ees ask las' night 'bout the road to the Reservation."

"This gits pretty close to the showdown with me," Johnny growled. "If Roddy ever gits me I'm as good as dead. I'd just have to make a move to have him shoot me down. 'Tryin' to git away' would be his answer. They'll never take me. It's a pretty mess they've cooked up, ain't it?"

"Well, what you do now, Johnny?"

"I'm goin' to do what I should 'a' done two days ago—go to Jim Kelsey. If there is any law in this county, he's it. Vin, Charlie Paul is campin' at that spring beyond Stiles's old place. He's got my horse. Go git him for me, will you. Tell him to wait in back of the hotel. I'll slip out that way now. No sense gittin' you or Scanlon mixed up in this."

"I go myself," Vin answered. He stopped at the door and seemed to hesitate about saying what was on his mind. "Johnny," he said haltingly,

“you hear all thees bad talk about Madeiras, yet you ask for heem. What you theenk?”

“Say, Vin,” Johnny said warmly, “he’s my best friend. What he does is done on my say-so. I don’t know where he is or what he is doin’, but it’s right with me.”

Johnny could not have said anything which would have pleased the Basque more. The pride of race was strong in Vin. His people had been fighting from the day they landed for the respect of the native sons.

The boy waited until the Basque had gone before he moved. He knew that he was face to face with trouble. Jim Kelsey held the decision. If what Johnny had to tell him was convincing enough, the district attorney could not refuse to act.

Gale’s mysterious absence also was of alarming importance. Having brought Thunder Bird to face the coroner, it followed, as a matter of course, that Tobias would endeavor to learn the outcome of that visit.

“He might ’a’ seen me drivin’ off with the old chief,” the boy thought. “He stole out of the

hotel just as I'm goin' to do now. You can bet the cautious Toby wasn't headed for Aaron's house."

Johnny tried to catch sight of Gallup's party as it rode out of town. To see the better he opened the trapdoor which led to the roof of the hotel and crawled out upon it. A mile away he could see four horsemen riding into the north.

"A buckboard wasn't fast enough for Gallup to-day, eh?" Johnny muttered. "They'll never git anywhere ridin' that fast. Aaron'll be so sore in an hour or two that he'll want to ride in a bed."

Johnny crossed the roof to the side nearest the railroad tracks and looked down on Gallup's house.

"My Lord," he said half aloud, "this would 'a' been a grand-stand seat for the doin's last evenin'. If Toby had crawled up here he wouldn't 'a' missed a thing. And you can just bet your last cookie that that's what he did. He's just about streakin' it right now for the Reservation. Him and the old chief are goin' to have another pow-

wow. Elk Valley is goin' to be 'way over-populated before this day is done. I've got a hunch some of the visitors are never goin' to come back to the Rock—unless Doc brings 'em."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

JOHNNY TALKS AT LAST

BIG JIM greeted Johnny with a laugh. People said that the district attorney knew more and said less than any one in the county. A look of almost infinite wisdom was in his eyes as he studied Johnny.

"Well," he questioned, "you're goin' to bust if you don't talk, Johnny? Let's have it."

"You hit the nail, Jim. Talk—a big order of it—is what I want to git off my mind."

"I've had my ears open, Johnny," Kelsey said. "I wondered when you'd drop in."

"You hain't heard *nothin'*. You wait. I've found out a-plenty since I started puttin' my nose into other people's business, as Gallup would say. I'm here to ask for a warrant."

"So? For whom?"

"For the coroner of this county—for the murder of Crosbie Traynor, same having occurred on

the night of October 4th in a room at the Palace Hotel. You listen to me and see if I'm crazy or not. I suppose you heard all the talk that was made the night we found the body? Well, I won't waste no time on that, but—I found the dead man's horse. I went through the saddlebags and I found a picture. Later, I got the dead man's name. I just kept on putting two and two together until I began to git scared at what I was findin' out. Git your pencil and make some notes."

Kelsey did as Johnny asked, but he made small use of the pencil. His mind grasped the facts as Johnny unfolded them. From time to time he stopped the boy to insert a question. Whenever he did so, Johnny's answers invariably enabled him to leap ahead to the next move in this game of life and death.

Sometimes Johnny raised questioning eyes as he wondered if he were making himself understood. Kelsey merely grunted in the affirmative. Once he whistled. Traynor's letter to Molly caused that.

The boy knew his story grasped the man's mind,

for, shrewd as Kelsey was, he could not keep all emotion from his eyes.

Johnny went on, bit by bit, until he had not only divulged his information, but had convinced the attorney of the conclusions he had drawn.

"Can I be wrong, Jim?" Johnny asked when he had finished.

"I don't think so. But you've got a house of cards. One absolutely provable fact is all you need to make your evidence steel proof. I'm willin' to go ahead. I know Roddy, he ought to be recalled. Lord know's you've got more than enough to arrest them on suspicion, but I wouldn't do it that way. Charge Gallup with it. Facts come out in a trial that you never dream of. We'll arrest the whole clique—Gallup, Gale, Kent, and even the Indian."

"I don't want Kent charged with murder," Johnny stated. "Can't we scare him into turning on Gallup? Aaron's the boy at the bottom of this pile."

"If you feel that way about it, Johnny, why not wait? Gallup will trip up if you give him time. Kent may put himself in the clear."

"No waitin' now, Jim. Trouble has caught right up with us. Roddy, Kent, Gallup and some deputy are out gunning for me. They've got a warrant chargin' me with abductin' Miss Molly. Havin' done it once, they've framed me into it again. It's just a game. They've taken the girl themselves. If Roddy gits a gun on me and I move a finger—good night—I'm a dead man."

Kelsey was on his feet. "We'll go. You get Ritter, maybe Scanlon, too. I'll be at the hotel in fifteen minutes at the latest."

"Come armed," Johnny warned. "This is goin' to be a battle. Gale is no doubt on the Reservation. Gallup will bump him off if he gits a chance. The same goes for the chief. It's a nice little way to shut men's mouths. If we lose Gale or the Injun, we're stuck."

"That is not what I'm afraid of," Kelsey answered. "Gallup is over his head in going to Elk Valley. Thunder Bird has more power than you suspect. Gallup has humiliated and shamed him. It's the one thing the old buck won't overlook. You could put a regiment of troops in Elk Valley and Gallup would still be in danger. When

it comes to a matter of tribal honor—look out! You can talk all you want to about civilization and its effect on the poor, downtrodden Indian; but he's got a kick left in him still. Four or five men are all we need."

"That 'll be you, me, Doc Ritter, Scanlon, and Charlie Paul. We'll be ready when you git there."

It happened, however, that when Kelsey rode up Vin had not returned with Charlie and Johnny's horse. A few minutes later, though, they arrived. The delay had allowed a crowd to form, for, in spite of Johnny's demand for secrecy, the news that a posse was being organized had spread.

Heavily armed, the five men rode out of the Rock. Soon after the town was left behind, Kelsey held up his hand and brought them to a stop.

"Men," said he, "you know what we're going after. I hope we won't have to fire a shot. I hold that shooting that goes unpunished because it's within the letter of the law is almost as bad as though it weren't. Law ought to mean justice and a square deal to all; when it's less than that, I don't want any of it. Let's go!"

CHAPTER XXIX

EVIDENCE TO CONVICT

JOHNNY was leading the posse two hours later when he signaled to the other men. "Rig comin'," he called as they moved within hearing distance. "Ought to pass it just about where the road forks. Let's hit it up a little."

Riding in close formation, they began rapidly to diminish the distance between themselves and the oncoming team.

"Driver asleep, him," the keen-eyed Charlie called to Johnny.

"Sorry, but we'll have to disturb him," Johnny answered. "Better spread out, boys. That team is runnin'."

In ten minutes the team was almost up with them.

"Whoa, there!" Johnny cried, but the driver paid no attention to the hail. "Look out!" the boy shouted to Doc Ritter. "I'll yank 'em as they go by."

Whirling his horse, Johnny planted himself in the path of the galloping team. A mad dive for a bridle strap, and he had the off horse on its haunches. "Grab the gray, Charlie!" he cried to the Indian.

Charlie Paul's hands shot out, and in another second the team was halted. Johnny took a look at the driver, who had slipped to the floor of the rig, his face blood-stained; blank, wide-open eyes staring up at the sky.

"There you are, Jim," Johnny shouted to Kelsey as he recognized the blood-smeared face. "It's Toby Gale! They got him, just as I said they would."

"God!" Kelsey moaned. "He's all banged up, ain't he? Give me a hand, and we'll get him out of the wagon."

"He's goin' to die," Doc Ritter announced after a hurried examination, "but he'll come back for a second or so before he goes. Somebody give me some whiskey."

Scanlon obliged, and between them they fanned the man's dying spark of life into a smoldering

flame. Tobias eyed the five of them in turn. Johnny held his gaze.

"Can you talk?" the boy asked.

Gale tried to move his lips, but no intelligent sound came from them.

"Wait, I'll lift up his head a bit," Doc volunteered.

Gale licked his lips. Seconds dragged by before he made a sound. When he did speak it was in flat, lifeless tones. He was looking at Ritter. "I'm dying, ain't I, Doc?" he asked.

"You're pretty bad off," Doc told him honestly.

Tobias just gazed helplessly at Ritter, searching the doctor's face for sign of the truth which he feared. The little man's eyelids drew back from the pupils of his eyes as he read his fate.

"Oh, God, Doc, I don't want to die!" he moaned. "I'm afraid of it. I can feel it coming on. It's awful!"

An unearthly sound broke from his lips. Ritter forced more of the whiskey down his throat. "Tell me what happened," he demanded. "Who shot you?"

Tobias shook his head slightly. "Let me talk,

Ritter," he muttered. "My God, I've never talked. Let me have a chance now. You others go away. I want to speak just to Johnny and Kelsey."

"Better humor him," Ritter advised as he got to his feet. "He'll go in a few minutes."

Johnny and the district attorney nodded their heads and got to their knees beside the dying man.

"What is it, Toby?" Johnny asked.

Toby stared at the boy for an interval before he answered. "You hate Aaron Gallup even as I do," he said at last. "That's why I called for you. Yes, I do hate him," he repeated in answer to the question in the boy's eyes. "I've always hated him—but he's got me."

"Gallup shot you?"

"Aaron Gallup—get that straight. Roddy was with him. Roddy didn't shoot, though.

"I was going to the Reservation. I'd brought the chief in to see Gallup last night—I'll tell you why later. You know they had trouble. I was on top the hotel. I saw you drive away with the old Indian. I got a team and started after you about daylight.

"I got just about here when I saw four men coming fast. I thought they were after me, and I raced the horses. The four of them split up at the forks. Roddy and Gallup chased me. When I saw it was Gallup I was afraid to stop. He yelled at me—so did the sheriff, but I kept on going.

"Gallup fired then. I must have turned around, for I saw his gun flash again. I fell out of the rig, I remember, because I was on the ground when I opened my eyes. Gallup was standing over me. 'Guess you'll stop now,' he said. 'You can talk your damned head off if you want to. Won't be any one to hear you blabbin' about me.'

"I let him know then that *I* had brought the chief to see him. Ha, ha—it was almost worth getting killed to be able to tell him that. He raised his foot and kicked me in the face, and riddled me again. He's got plenty to swing for, Kelsey. Not me alone, either. Johnny knows I'm right about that. Due to me that man Traynor came to the Rock. I don't know how it happened, but Gallup or Kent killed him."

Johnny and Kelsey flashed a glance at each other.

"Oh, Lord!" Gale moaned. "I can't breathe. Where's that bottle?"

"Give him all he wants," Ritter called to Johnny. "It won't put him under."

Johnny had been staring at the man's ragged chest, but he had to turn his head away as the stimulant began to have an effect on Gale's heart.

"I got to talk quick, don't I?" Tobias asked. "Gallup ground me into the dirt for years. I made up my mind to get square with him some time. He was too cautious. I knew he had covered up something in his past. It must have been two years before I got on the trail of what it was.

"I was on the Reservation one day. Thunder Bird was getting married again. He was all decked out. Around his neck he had a chain of beads, and hanging on the middle of it was a piece of a white man's silver watch chain. It was Mexican made, I guess—I'd only seen the like of it once before; Gallup had such a chain, and it always looked to me as if it had been broken off.

"I asked the chief where he got those links. He was on edge in a second. I mentioned Gallup's name. That floored him. I found out afterward that he had not been in town for years, that he had no idea of Gallup's nearness. I made a good friend of the Indian. It took me a year or more to piece together the story of Gallup's past; but I got it. That was three years ago.

"I managed it so that Thunder Bird got a look at Kent and Gallup. He recognized them at a glance.

"I got busy hunting for Traynor. Took me until a month ago to find him. When he came I was on the Reservation. I talked to him, and part of what I'm going to tell you I got from him, the rest from the chief. Now, for God's sake don't let me pass out until I've finished."

Gale paused for a second or so. "Got to make it short," he began again. "It was down in Arizona. Traynor, Kent, and Gallup had a copper claim in the Painted Desert. Traynor was married. Had a wife and baby girl living in Flagstaff. All this happened nineteen or twenty years ago.

"Thunder Bird had skipped from the Reserva-

tion—some trouble growing out of the Mormon raid—he was hiding out down around the Little Colorado. Traynor hired him to freight supplies to their mine.

“The claim began to look so good that Gallup and Kent decided to get rid of Traynor. They sent the Indian to town, and as soon as they were alone the two of them jumped their man, hog-tied him and rolled him out in the sun to die of thirst. Two days nearly finished him.

“Kent, then, loaded him on a mule and took him out north and left him for the buzzards. They were in the clear—men dying right along like that for want of water. They put up a fine show when the Indian returned. Told him Traynor had been gone two days; that they had hunted for him until their water gave out.

“It was a pat yarn, but the Indian noticed that broken watch chain and found the piece Traynor had twisted off in the fight. That night he stole what water there was in camp and went after the missing man. He searched for days without finding him. A wandering band of Shewits had picked up Traynor and carried him off to their village

north of the Virgin. Two months later Thunder Bird found him there.

"Traynor went back to Flagstaff, but Kent and Gallup were gone, also his wife and child. Six or seven years elapsed before they showed up in this country. Traynor's wife had died. Kent claimed the girl for his daughter."

"You mean Molly?" Johnny gasped. "She ain't Kent's daughter?"

"No. Her right name is Molly Traynor. Traynor combed the West looking for them. That's why I couldn't find him. Gallup had sold the mine for a good price. Traynor managed to get a little out of it. I guess that about tells it.

"I didn't know Kent was shipping from the Rock this year or I would 'a' warned Traynor. Gallup had left for Salt Lake to be gone a week. I thought it was all right for the man to come into town.

"But both Gallup and Kent were here. I knew it that night when I got back. I watched; I was sure there'd be trouble. I didn't want Traynor killed. I wanted to break Gallup. He knows

how it was done, Kelsey. Make him tell—make him talk. Promise me you'll get him."

"Johnny knows how Traynor was killed," Kelsey answered. "If it's any comfort to you, you can bank on it that we'll get Mr. Gallup—and he'll talk."

CHAPTER XXX

MADEIRAS APPEARS AT LAST

JOHNNY got to his feet in a daze, leaving it to Kelsey to close the dead man's eyes. The boy had easily grasped Gale's dramatic story, but his brain was so busily engaged in separating the many details into their proper sequence that it was impossible for him to think clearly.

Out of the jumble of confused facts one thing came to overwhelm him. Molly was not Kent's daughter! That was his big surprise.

In a way, Gale's story explained things about as Johnny had fancied them. Beyond question Gallup had been the actual murderer. Kent was almost equally guilty, though. Johnny realized how impossible it was going to be to keep the cattleman from spending the rest of his days in jail.

"Thank God, he ain't her father!" he said to himself. "He's guilty, and he'll have to pay for it."

The other men were bunched about Kelsey, and Johnny heard him say:

"Gallup shot him. Gale had so much on the man that Gallup had to kill him. Johnny had enough on Aaron to satisfy me; Tobias clinched it. He swore that Jackson Kent and the coroner of this county killed Crosbie Traynor—it was to hide a crime committed twenty years ago. It's a strange story, boys; but the thing to do now is to get going. We want Kent and Gallup alive—remember that."

"Best thing to do, I guess, is to unhitch the team, and put Gale back in the rig and leave him here," Doc suggested. "Did you notice this, Jim? Gale's gun? It's been shot twice. He must have tried to get in a lick."

"No," Johnny cut in. "They fired it after they'd got him; threw it in the wagon and gave the horses hell. If it hadn't been for us Gale's body wouldn't have been found until the team got to town. That would have looked like suicide to a lot of people."

"That's about the way I figure it," Kelsey agreed. "If you boys are ready we'll go."

Johnny and the district attorney rode abreast as the party started on.

"Glad you didn't say anythin' about the girl," the boy remarked. "I want to save her all the misery I can."

"I know, Johnny; but it's not going to be possible to keep Kent out of this. Most of the money he has belongs to her. She will get her share of Gallup's pile, too. The best thing to do is to come clean with the whole story."

"I don't want you to do that, Jim—not until you have to. Only for me there wouldn't have been a murmur. I nailed Gallup and Kent. Molly's happiness is all the reward I want. I've got a right to ask for that, and I'm doin' it now. I don't know where she is, but I'll find her. In some way I'm goin' to try and break this thing to her a little at a time. She's suffered enough these past weeks."

"Don't fret, Johnny. And I want to give you a bit of advice. You can take it or not. It's well meant. You'll find the girl. Kent wouldn't harm her. I think I know how things are between you; marry her—at once. Get her down to San

Francisco or Santa Cruz. After you're there, begin to tell her the truth. And remember this—when you come back *don't* go to the ranch. Get a house down in Winnemucca. Buy a car, and you'll be able to get back and forth from the ranch in no time."

"That's sure a gay future you're paintin' for me," Johnny smiled lugubriously. "All I got to do is to make her see it—takin' me and all the rest of it."

"Well, I'm going to pay you a sincere compliment, Johnny—she couldn't pick a better man."

"Oh, pie!" Johnny exclaimed, ridiculing Kelsey's words.

"Pie or cream puffs," the attorney remonstrated, "it's all the same with me. I know what I know. When a man will play as hard as you play, I know he'll work when the playing days are over. The Diamond-Bar is a big property. No matter what happens to Kent he'll have to give the girl her share. That 'll be a job for you. Preach it into Miss Molly that she must start a clean slate. Old scenes bring back old memories, and old memories haunt us. The past is past."

Kelsey laughed to himself. "That's the most talking I've done in a right smart bit of time. No charges, either."

Johnny smiled, too. "Well, at least I'm obliged to you, Jim," he drawled. "You've got *my* vote, anyhow."

Scanlon, who had been riding ahead, drew up his horse and waited for the others to come abreast him. "We'd better spread out," he suggested. "If they see us riding together it's going to look suspicious. They don't know we're after them. If each man goes it alone one of us is sure to pick them up. Let the one that does string along until he meets another man. Between the two of them they ought to get the drop."

"You always did know how to draw to a hand, Scanlon," Johnny answered approvingly. "I say, break up right here."

"All right," Kelsey agreed. "Each of us understands what to do. I'll take the eastern cañon; Scanlon, you go straight ahead; Doc and Johnny and Charlie Paul can spread out to the west and work north. We'll meet at the Agency by evening."

In pursuance of this plan they separated. In half an hour Johnny found himself alone, crossing a narrowing plain between two broken ranges. The Indian was on his left, Doc Ritter on his right. By noon time they were miles apart.

The plain which Johnny had traversed came to an end. Before him arose giant mountains. It was his intention to scale them and later on to cross a high plateau to his north, eventually coming to the trail which led to the post trader's store.

The boy's horse made slow progress during the next hour. Every foot of the way was an uphill climb. On reaching a fairly level basin in the mountainside Johnny stopped to let his pony get his wind. Reaching for his tobacco and papers, Johnny began rolling a cigarette.

The *zing-g-g-g* of a bullet terminated the operation very abruptly. With a backward lunge the boy threw himself out of his saddle, and, hugging the ground, wriggled to the cover of a giant boulder. Ten yards away he could see his hat, a neat little hole showing where the bullet had passed through.

Not more than a second later, it seemed, an-

other shot sounded. Johnny's head swung around to find the source of it. As he stared above him he saw a man rise to his feet, sway for an instant as his gun dropped from his hands, and sink back out of sight.

"It's Kent!" Johnny gasped.

A voice called then:

"Hullo—Johnny! Hees all right for stand up. It's me—Madeiras!"

CHAPTER XXXI

THE DEATH CHANT

"FOR God's sake!" Johnny cried when he reached Madeiras. "What did you kill him for?"

"Eet's either you or heem. You t'ink I let heem pump lead into you like that?"

"Have you been stalkin' him?"

"I watch heem all right. Thunder Bird and feefty braves ees up beyond. Gallup and Roddy ees on other side of mountain. You most t'ink eet was a raid. Gallup die if he come close."

"We've got to stop that, Tony. Gale's been shot. He confessed. Gallup killed both him and Traynor. Kelsey and a posse are spread out in the hills to git him. I been lookin' my eyes out for you. Who told you I was alive?"

"The chief. He tell me you want me."

"You bet! Kent and Gallup have got Molly hidden somewhere. They swore out a warrant for me, chargin' I took her."

Tony smiled very superiorly. "No," he said. "They ain't got her; me, Tony Madeiras, has got the girl!"

"What? You stole her?"

"*Sí!* I watch Gallup leave town las' night. I lose time before I follow, but I go pretty dam' fas' when I get started. I t'ink he ees go to the ranch. I say I tak' the girl before I let heem have her. *Por Dios*, that girl hate me. I have fight to tak' her away." Tony shook his head. "Such nice girl, Johnny—sometime I wish you not come back."

"Well, where is she now?" Johnny demanded excitedly.

"Don' worry; she's safe—she's in Thunder Bird's lodge. Hees squaw ees tak' good care of her."

"That's no place for her, Tony. I don't want her to know anythin' about what's happenin' to-day. You git behind me now and we'll crawl over to Kent. Look out; he may not be dead. He lost his rifle, but he may have a pistol on him."

"No need be afraid," Tony assured Johnny. "I tak' good aim."

When they found Kent he was propped against a rock with a pistol in his hand, but he was so far gone that he could not lift his arm to fire. "Go 'way," he muttered. "Let me die in peace."

"No, Kent," answered Johnny. "Too many things have happened to-day to go without a word with you. With all your faults I know you love Molly. I've got to talk. Gale has been killed. He told the truth about you and Gallup and Traynor. There's a posse surroundin' Gallup. They'll git him if Thunder Bird don't."

"You lyin'?" the old man questioned.

"I'll prove that I ain't," the boy replied, and he retold part of Gale's story.

"You win," Kent said at last. "I never should have opposed you. But I ain't afraid to die. Best that I do, I guess. Molly is against me. You killed her love for me—and she did love me. Yes, she did! Won't you fix it some way, Johnny, so that she won't know all—that—that she wasn't my girl?"

"I ain't taken a penny of her money. In fact, I've doubled what I got out of the mine. It's all hers. Gallup's got my notes for thirty thousand.

He won't be able to collect. That's good, ain't it—beatin' him?

"He shot 'Cross.' Got him from the top of one of those box cars while I was tryin' to make an alibi for myself by sittin' in Ritter's office. Think of him turnin' on me after what we'd been through—tryin' to take Molly. God, I'm glad she's free of him! Tell her you and me made it up, Johnny—that I said I hoped you two 'd be happy. Will you do that?"

The old man tried to lift his arm beseechingly.

"Don't let her know about me—don't tell her she wasn't my child," he begged. "I raised her, Johnny—her little baby hands. I can feel them."

In spite of Johnny's efforts Kent forced himself half erect. "You've got to promise me, do you hear?" he went on. "I couldn't die if I thought she was goin' to know. I couldn't, I tell you—I—I—couldn't."

He fell back before the boy could catch him. Madeiras put his ear to the man's chest.

"He's gone," Johnny whispered to the Basque. "Yes, sir, the old man's gone! There's all that's

left of Jackson Kent. Two months ago who'd ever have thought it would come to this?"

Johnny got to his feet and walked to a bowlder and sat down. "I got so I was hatin' him," he said to Tony, "and yet it kinda chokes me up to see him lyin' there like that. Things used to be pretty pleasant in the old days on the range."

Johnny's words and the look on his face caused Madeiras more concern than the sight of Kent's lifeless body. Going to the boy's side, he placed his arm around his shoulders.

"Never min', Johnny," he said. "Kent try dam' hard do ever't'ing bad for you. No reason for you mak' me feel all bus' up."

"No, I don't suppose there is; but I'm goin' to try and do as he wished. If the old man had been all bad he would have put Molly into some institution and forgot her. Whatever he did that was wrong—he was good to her. So don't talk, Tony. These things square themselves in time."

Johnny got up and covered Kent's face.

"Where's his horse?" the boy asked.

"Back where I lef' mine," Madeiras answered, pointing to a little park of stunted cedars.

"No matter," Johnny went on, "we got to leave him here or—say! We'll throw him on my horse and tote him to the trees. We can tie him up between some of those cedars so the coyotes won't be able to git at him. Give me a hand; we got to git movin'."

When they arrived at the trees they put a rope around Kent's body, and passed the end of it through a noose in another rope which they had looped over the top of one of the trees. By this arrangement they were able to lift the body from the ground and raise it to a place of safety.

Johnny had knotted the ropes when he suddenly came to attention. Madeiras glanced at him sharply.

"What ees eet?" the Basque asked.

Johnny had his hands cupped to his ears. "Listen," he whispered.

Faint, far off, came the measured, significant sound which had alarmed the boy. The Basque's expression showed that he, too, heard it.

"Do you get it?" Johnny asked. "*Tum, tum, tu-um, tum, tum*—it's a finger drum."

"Sí," Tony nodded, his voice dry, his hand

keeping time with the beat. "Eet's the death chant. Old——"

"Thunder Bird's got Gallup!" Johnny finished for the Basque. "*That's* what is waitin' for us on the top of this mountain! All we got to do is to go into that Piute camp and take Gallup away from them. And we've got to do it with gab. I know Injuns. Every minute we wait here only makes our chances slimmer. Believe me, if we're goin' to save Gallup—we've got to travel."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE DEBT IS PAID

A STRANGE sight awaited Johnny and the Basque. Thunder Bird's braves had surprised Gallup and captured him. Roddy, his deputy—Sol Ahrens—and Kent had bolted. So, without a shot having been fired, old Aaron had been marched to the camp at the top of the mountain.

The rock formation looked very much as if it was of volcanic origin, a huge crater or bowl having been carved out where the peak of the mountain must once have risen. In this bowl was the Piute camp.

Johnny and Madeiras, from the point they had gained above the Indians, were able to see what went on. Gallup was tied to a stake. Thunder Bird sat facing him, and squatting in a circle about the doomed man were at least fifty Indians. Two or three squaws moved around in back of the circle, gathering rocks and depositing them in piles within reach of their lords.

"They're goin' to stone him," Johnny told the Basque. "It's a good old Piute trick."

Gallup's voice rose above the throbbing of the drum, but what he said was not intelligible to the two men watching him. Thunder Bird sat unmoved, gloating over the man before him, Aaron's torrent of words only adding to his enjoyment.

At a signal from one of the chief's sons the squaws left their gathering of rocks and approached the single lodge which had been erected. A brief wrangling, and Johnny saw Molly step forth from the tent's folds. Ten seconds later the chief's lodge fell in the dust. A brief moment of labor and the Indian women had it strapped on a pony.

Johnny saw Thunder Bird raise his hand as Molly approached him. Plainly he was exhibiting her to Gallup. The Indian's sense of the dramatic was superb. He intended that Aaron should think that he had stolen her.

Gallup turned his entreaties to Molly, but she seemed deaf to them. Johnny saw her pick up a rock from the piles which the squaws had made. She held it out questioningly toward old Thunder

Bird. Rapid words followed, the chief continuing to shake his head negatively.

Molly's actions became vehement. The chief held up his hand to his women. It ended the argument, for the next second Molly was being led toward the distant crest of the large bowl.

"He wouldn't listen to her," thought the boy. "She savvied those piles of rock." Aloud, then, he added:

"They're sendin' her away. It's pretty refined of the old chief not to make her witness what's comin' off."

"Well, what we do now?" Tony asked. "You t'ink she's any good for go down there?"

"I'm goin' to try it," Johnny answered. "You stay here. Maybe they won't let me come in to camp. If they do I'll palaver and stall as long as I can. Kelsey and the others will be showin' up before long. They can't be asleep at the Agency to what is goin' on. Ames is Injunwise. If these braves git started the top is likely to blow off before they're calmed down again."

"Bes', I t'ink, to stay right here," Tony stated firmly.

"And fail—after all my talkin'? Not on your life. I'm goin' to git Gallup, as I said I would. My luck ain't so bad. Say, where'd you get that trinket on the hat? That's Traynor's, ain't it?"

"Sí. I get heem out of Gallup's purse when he geeve eet to me for keel you. That's why I mak' so much excitement. Maybe you tak' eet."

Tony offered the gold snake to Johnny, but the boy waved it back.

"No—I'll play my own stuff. You watch me when I git down there. If I hold up my hand, you shoot—fire two or three times. I'll be tellin' 'em how many men I got around the rim. If the others arrive in time, maybe they'll understand, too."

They shook hands, and Johnny moved away, Madeiras's eyes following him. When the boy was within two hundred yards of the camp the Basque saw him raise his right hand, palm flat, above his head, his left hand, palm pointing downward, dropping until it hung below his waist. It was the Piute sign for a parley.

Johnny avoided any cover, lest it be thought

that he stole up on them. A few seconds later he was seen.

Contrary to the white man's nice little laws, these Indians were armed. Johnny caught the flash of the sun's rays on the polished barrels, but he continued to walk toward them. Thunder Bird turned his head in the boy's direction as he advanced.

Gallup had recognized Johnny, and he cursed him. Johnny ignored Aaron. When he reached the chief's side, the boy's hands moved until the tips of his fingers rested against his forehead. It was the sign of friendship. The chief answered and motioned to Johnny to sit down.

Instead of complying, Johnny took the drum from the player's hands, and, holding it before Thunder Bird, dropped a handful of dust upon it. It was symbolic—the omen of disaster. A murmur passed around the circle of squatting Indians.

The old chief caught the boy's meaning. "Nah!" he grunted angrily.

"My tongue speaks no lie," Johnny answered flatly. "It is the drum of death! Many men are

in the hills. They are near. They no ask question—just shoot.”

Thunder Bird's head moved back and forth assuredly. A sarcastic, mocking grunt broke from his lips. “White men run,” he announced. “All gone.”

He referred to the other members of Gallup's party. Not knowing this, Johnny wondered if his play was doomed.

“Some go, many more come, chief,” he went on without a sign of wavering. “Piute women rub ashes in their hair to-night. Me good friend with you, Thunder Bird. Me tell um you, no take Gallup—white man want him. Man Gale, he is dead; man Kent, he dead, too. Make talk—plenty talk. Big Jim come. Many guns come with him. Mebbe so you remember Mormon fight? Plenty Injun die; no fires in the lodges. Now come so happen again.”

And Johnny stooped and threw a handful of dust into his own face; from his lips came the doleful notes of the chant for the dead.

Thunder Bird stirred uneasily. The boy, wisely, had made no demands. What he had said

had been only the airing of his sadness over the calamity facing the tribe. His talk held truths as Thunder Bird knew—the Mormon raid, for instance. Doubts for the safety of his band began to assail the chief. He saw his braves staring at Johnny.

That individual was keenly alive to the fact that the issue hung in the balance right now. If his bluff were called he would be in for it.

Bluff was one of Thunder Bird's weapons also. He availed himself of it now. "We keep Gallup," he said. "No take away him. Men not come. If men come, where they be?"

Johnny's hand was being called. He did not flinch. With a look that said a thousand men surrounded them he lifted his hand and began sweeping it around the edge of the bowl. "They are there," he said.

His hand pointed toward the spot where Madeiras lay. *Bang, bang, bang*, came the sound of the Basque's gun.

"There are many," Johnny paused to say cautiously before his hand moved onward. Was there any one else up there to answer him—

Scanlon, Doc, Kelsey? God help him if there was not. An eternity passed for the boy as his hand started again and moved a foot without receiving an answer. Johnny knew that he was taking the supreme gamble of his life. Another few inches his hand moved, and then *bang, bang, bang* came the report of a gun.

"Good old Doc Ritter," Johnny murmured to himself, thinking he recognized the sound of Doc's heavy calibered weapon.

Johnny's hand was sweeping along. Another series of shots rang out. A pause then until his hand pointed in the very direction in which Molly had gone. The next instant a fusillade of shots echoed in the basin. Over the crest came a band of men—twenty-five or thirty of them.

"It is Ames and the agent!" Johnny cried aloud. "Thank God!" The boy had no need to fear that his words had been overheard. The Indians were in a panic. Only old Thunder Bird sat unmoved.

Johnny ran toward the oncoming men, his hands raised as he shouted to them to put down their guns. By the time they met, Kelsey and Scanlon

were running down to them. A minute more and Ritter and Madeiras appeared.

Ames had organized the party.

"What's it all about, Johnny?" Ames asked. "I shore thought they wuz out to raise ha'r."

"They just wanted Gallup. He's treated the chief as though he was a water boy. When you hurt his dignity you're hurtin' somethin'."

"Wal, you'd better untie Gallup," Ames suggested. "He don't look happy."

"I'll take care of him," Kelsey announced. "I want him for murder."

This statement caused some excitement among the trader's party. Kelsey explained briefly. "We'll take him back to town," he went on. "Maybe you can find a horse for the old chief. Patch it up with him. I'll want him for a witness when this case comes to trial."

Gallup had a tirade ready for Kelsey and the others as they approached him. "'Bout time some one came," he growled. "Injuns do about as they please on the Reservation nowadays."

"Aaron Gallup," Kelsey interrupted, "I've got

a warrant for your arrest. You're wanted for the murder of Crosbie Traynor."

Gallup winced as if he had been shot. "Like hell I am," he roared when he recovered his breath. "That whipper-snapper there is at the bottom of this!" And he hurled an oath at Johnny.

"That's enough out of you, Gallup," Kelsey snapped. "The boy got you, all right. We've had Gale's story also."

"And Kent's," Johnny added. "He's dead," he continued in answer to Jim's question. "He tried to plug me; Tony stopped him. It was just as we had it figured. Gallup shot Traynor from the top of a box car."

"That's goin' to be right hard on the girl," the trader exclaimed. "Losin' her paw thata-way. I took her and sent her down to my house just a while back. The Injuns had her."

"You'll get her now," Gallup sneered at Johnny. "You're welcome to her. What is she, anyhow? You think she's——"

Madeiras had plucked a glowing faggot from a little "squaw" fire which the Indians had made.

He pressed it against Gallup's mouth. "Wan more word, Gallup," he dared, "and I shove thees down your dam', no-good t'roat!"

Thunder Bird broke his silence long enough to grunt his approval of this proposed action.

"You and Tony will be going with Ames," Kelsey stated. "Our party will go back the way you came, Johnny. Guess we'd better take Kent's body with us. Where'll we find it?"

"In that little park of cedars soon after you start downhill."

"Wal, we'll git goin' out of hyar," Ames announced. "What about you, chief? Better trail along."

Thunder Bird shook his head.

"Suit yoreself. So-long, boys."

Gallup, gloomy and sullen, got to his feet; the parties separated and soon lost sight of each other.

"Never seen trouble come yit when the agent wuz home," the trader grumbled as they mounted their horses. "Reckon this is about Thunder Bird's last good time."

CHAPTER XXXIII

FULFILLMENT

JOHNNY found Molly sitting on the steps of the trader's house when he arrived at the Agency. Her face was proof enough of the worry and excitement she had undergone. The boy's heart sank as he realized that he had to hurt her still more by the news he carried. Delay the telling as long as he might, the truth had to be faced.

Johnny might have spared himself this misery, for Molly knew more than he suspected, and explanations, which Johnny dreaded, were to be spared him.

She ran toward him, arms outstretched, as he jumped down from his horse. "Oh, Johnny," she said sadly, "it's been a terrible day. I think I'll break down completely if you don't get me home at once. I was on the ridge with Mr. Ames when you walked into Thunder Bird's camp. I wasn't afraid for you. The chief had told me so

many things this day that I knew he was your friend. What did they do with Gallup?"

"They arrested him for the Traynor murder. Aaron shot Gale this mornin', and Toby confessed before he died."

"It didn't need that, though, from what I've been told, to convict him. You proved your case against him. What a beast he has been. And—*him*—what have they done with him?"

Although he suspected she referred to Kent, Johnny stared blankly at Molly.

"I—I mean Kent," she went on. "He was with Gallup this morning."

"Why—er—he's pretty bad off, I—er——"

"Is he dead, Johnny? Tell me the truth."

Johnny nodded his head slowly. "Yes," he muttered, "he's dead. He tried to kill me. Tony got him."

Molly bit her lip in a vain effort to keep the tears back.

"I didn't want you to know about your father, Molly," the boy mumbled.

"No, Johnny," Molly told him frankly. "There's no need for you to fool me longer."

Thunder Bird told me. Crosbie Traynor was my father. No wonder that I felt the call within me when I received his note."

Johnny caught her as a sob broke from her lips. "Oh, Johnny," she cried. "Take me into your arms and pet me. I haven't any one but you now!"

"I'll git you away from here, Molly," the boy told her. "We're goin' to git married. You take some clothes and we'll go down to California for two or three months. Kelsey and Hobe will look after things; and Tony, too, if you'll let him. He's blackened his good name and made you hate him to help me. Don't worry about to-morrow. They'll keep on comin' just as regular as if nothin' had ever happened. Time fixes up these hurts."

It was even as Johnny said. Three months later, basking in the sunshine of old Santa Cruz, Molly and Johnny agreed that happiness was just beginning for them.

They had tried to keep their romance a secret, but the San Francisco newspapers found them out. Although the young couple acted sedately around the hotel, they realized, as brides and grooms

always do, that people knew they were honeymooners.

Johnny was sitting alone on the beach one evening, watching the silver-tipped waves breaking over the wide sands of Monterey Bay, when Molly stole up behind him and slipped her arms about his neck. He caught her and held her until she paid a proper forfeit with her lips.

"Nice people do not kiss in public," Molly said, teasingly.

"Well, you knew my past before you married me," Johnny retorted with a mischievous grin.

"Oh, did I—there!" And Molly kissed him again. "I've just received a wonderful letter from Jim Kelsey. It's full of good things about you. Jim says he's sorry he advised you to move out of the county. Folks want to elect you to something or other."

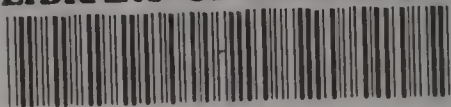
Johnny held up his hands in mock horror.

"No, sir, never again!" he declared. "I've got the job I was after. Nevada will have to look out for herself."

THE END.

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